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**The Role of Anger in Sport and Interpersonal Relationships:
A Discussion Regarding Intimate Partner Violence in
At the Corner of Love and Basketball by Allison Glock**

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At the Corner of Love and Basketball is a stark and tragic story of *amour fou* that doesn't bother with romantic notions of attractive opposites, opting instead to use the binary structure of a single romantic relationship to explore the powerful nature of anger. Malika Willoughby and Rosalind Ross (referred to by their respective surnames throughout) were two urban women on the cusp of adulthood. Initially bonded by their shared love of basketball, the pair was soon consumed by an intense, murky attraction that mixed elements of hero worship, raw talent, and inherent attachment issues with a Molotov cocktail of adolescent hormones. It was a volatile combination, and the results were more devastating than anyone could have anticipated.

Ross, the elder, was a gifted athlete with an easy smile, a natural talent for the game of basketball, and a secret: she was gay, a trait wholly unsupported by her family. Willoughby was her understudy: similarly focused, yet lacking the generally sunny nature of her girlfriend, she grew up hardened and wary, stolidly bearing the burden of her mother's mental instability and acting as a surrogate parent for her siblings. Though she made no apologies for her romantic partners, and seemed to hold little regard for the scraps of edifice that made a rough sketch of her family life, Willoughby, like Ross, longed for parental approval that would not be granted---her mother was as homophobic as Ross' father, unpredictably cruel, and by all accounts, on tenuous terms with reality (Glock 4).

Perhaps the result of their similar upbringing and similarly tragic formative experiences, the two women found solace in one another. Ross provided Willoughby with the structure and emotional support missing from the young woman's life, and received freedom in return: the freedom to be herself, to live her life uncloseted, to let fly her trademark yipping laughter. Sadly, good intentions are no match for the stressors of existence, and ultimately, neither woman possessed the skills or emotional maturity necessary to balance the supportive elements of their

personalities with the circumstances that surrounded their lives. In 2011, following an extended separation (during which each tried, and largely failed, to achieve success via their athletic talent), extenuating events brought Ross and Willoughby back home. Introduced once more into each other's orbits, they set to rebuilding their relationship on a foundation of sand. Ross, aided by alcohol and drug dependency spiraled into depression, and Willoughby's anxious, controlling tendencies, honed by years caring for her siblings and dodging the wrath of her mother, reached an all-time high. Following several escalating confrontations, Ross ultimately lost the last grains of her freedom at the hands of Willoughby, who shot her in fit of jealous rage during a visit to a Popeye's restaurant in the women's hometown.

Ross's death was captured in the cold, grainy lens of a security camera which hovered over the Popeye's parking lot; the shooting itself so visceral, so sudden and violent, that it incites the same itchy, wordless frenzy in the reader as it does in Willoughby. Caught in the camera's gaze, Willoughby appeared electrified, her madness made physical by disbelief and the slowly dawning recognition that she was suddenly, totally, alone. Bewildered, she stalked the length of a parking space as she'd later stalk the length of her cell: with the halting intent of a terrified cat, all jerky limbs and fearful instinct, yowling pitifully against untenable outcomes.

In interviews following the murder, Ross' family members echoed Willoughby's unmoved anger. Ross's father's confusion was straightforward enough---the brutal loss of his daughter---but woven through with guilt and dismay over his daughter's life as a gay woman, which he perceived as a conscious choice, as well as his polarizing reaction to that truth, which he (and other members of the his family) believe drove his daughter into the arms of her killer. Although Willoughby's family was largely unreachable for comment, her attorney and a small collection of friends and supporters maintain that Willoughby, not Ross, was the victim of

Intimate Partner Violence, defined by the World Health Organization as the most common form of violence against women, and characterized by controlling behavior by one partner toward another, in measures up to and including physical abuse (p..). It should be noted that there is little corroborative evidence to support this claim, as the many reports of mysterious bruises on Willoughby can be paired with eyewitness reports positing that such injuries were sustained on the basketball court.

However, discussions between friends and casual observers of the lovers indicate that the relationship between the two women was tainted by violent tendencies, and although it is understandable that a defense attorney might see fit to pin a cloak of violence and control about a dead woman's shoulders, jailhouse missives from Willoughby to both her perpetually absent mother and Ross's father, seem to indicate that she, not Ross, carried the burden of intrusive and obsessive thoughts that often characterize perpetrators of domestic abuse. Further, while it has been found that violence is not a hallmark of those who suffer with severe mental disorders, perpetrators of domestic violence "often meet criteria for personality disorders, most commonly Antisocial, Borderline, Dependent, Depressed, and Narcissistic" (as cited by Christoff, Henning, and Murrell, 2007, p. 525).

In *On the Corner of Love and Basketball*, author Allison Glock notes that Willoughby was diagnosed with Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD). While APD is a complex and nuanced diagnosis, the moniker *Avoidant* refers a specific variant of general attachment styles, which are developed throughout infancy and within the formative years of childhood by an array of conscious and intuited impressions gathered by a child in response to parental stimuli. (Psychology Today). In the particular case of those suffering with the avoidant variant, individual success in the realm of interpersonal relationships is limited by perpetual feelings of

inadequacy, fear of abandonment, and need for approval. (Glock 2). In light of this information, it's important to consider Willoughby's upbringing, which was characterized by poverty, abandonment, and erratic (at best) attempts at parenting that almost certainly influenced her emotional and psychological development. In her letters from jail, Willoughby's fear of abandonment is clear, and her writing references a need to prove her love for Ross, and win back not only her mother's approval, but that of her late lover.

While it seems plausible that the documented personality diagnosis and other psychosocial factors may have influenced Willoughby's actions on the night that she shot Ross, there is surprisingly little insight into her case. Apart from a handful of articles parroting the court ruling and regurgitated snippets of Glock's article for ESPN, the media remained quiet, seemingly filing the shocking culmination of two women's lives away as nothing more than an escalated spat between two lovers. Although it might be more convenient to shy away from examining a potential correlation between feminine aggression in sport and its reverberation in interpersonal relationships (and vice versa), the fact remains that this is a legitimate issue, and one about which there is a disturbing dearth of information. In *Female Violence In Sport: Maybe It Isn't Just the Testosterone*, Mitch Abrams echoes this sentiment, citing several instances in which feminine aggression is downplayed in the media as the perpetrator having "snapped", and asserting that "violence is not a male-owned behavior" (p. 2).

Given the increase in capable female competitors within the historically masculine realm of sport, it's unsurprising that aggressive women would be viewed more sympathetically, as if they somehow wandered blind into an arena and were forced to don a mantle of masculine attributes which rendered them unfamiliar to themselves and at violent odds with their rivals. Society, for its part, seems all too eager to bend the perception of female athletes to suit the

popular whim: the same women who are expected to be sexless, emotionless powerhouses of speed and aggression are repainted with a brush of overt femininity when faced with scrutiny for unsportsmanlike conduct or violence toward their family or partners.

Although I'm inclined to agree with Abrams' overarching assertion that violence isn't a gender-relevant trait, I wonder if, similar to attachment styles, the tendency of some female athletes toward violence can be traced to a reaction occurring between an individual's existing biological disposition (such as personality or mood disorders), and the intense vacuum that surrounds female sports. It's no secret that professional sports overwhelmingly favor hegemonic perceptions of masculinity, and promote the associated values of strength, courage, calm under pressure, and the mythology of the superhero "everyman" to great popularity and financial gain (Berg and Harthcock 139).

Further, in spite of its persistent success in promoting the masculine athletic ideal, sports culture struggles to accurately represent feminine athleticism and ultimately defaulting to lazily-drawn parallels between commonly-held virtues and assigning them a sex (either overtly or via implication) based upon anticipated public perception. Thus, the expectations laid out for female athletes far surpass those of their male counterparts, and faced with such subjective parameters of judgement, it is no wonder that female athletes regularly feel pressure to subvert whatever their personal level of inherent femininity may be in order to both fit in and stand out.

In the wake of "Blade Runner" Oscar Pistorius' conviction for the murder of his girlfriend, Nsenga K. Burton, Ph.D., wrote an editorial for The Root in which she discusses domestic violence within global sports culture, stating that the US does not value the role of women within the realm of sport. She points to violence against this population as the primary support for this argument, citing that "One in three women in the US will become a victim in her

lifetime...violence against women should not be status quo in sports, even if it's a celebrated female athlete doing it" (p. 2-3). While Burton makes a valid argument, she, and the media at large, still view the issue of domestic violence in sports as a male/female issue. By doing so, they continue to marginalize women, simply because they fail to analyze violence perpetrated by athletes, specifically Intimate Partner Violence, as a psychosocial issue, independent of sex- or gender-based complexities. In an arena where women already fight for rank, they are further stifled by an abdication of responsibility for aggressive behavior which defies the parameters of social, athletic, or legal validity . It's a frustrating paradox, and one which remains surprisingly resilient in the changing face of the global sports landscape.

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