

What to Say to Boys and Young Men about Big Ben

By Jackson Katz

This coming Sunday, Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger has the chance to win his third Super Bowl and join a truly elite group of NFL quarterbacks. This historic opportunity comes at the end of a season that began with him serving a four-game suspension by the National Football League for allegedly sexually assaulting a young woman in a bar last March -- the second sexual assault allegation against him in a year. (Neither allegation resulted in criminal charges.)

"Big Ben's" behavior and his team's success present a classic "teachable moment", especially given that the Super Bowl is the most widely watched television program in the United States, with an estimated 100 million viewers. There undoubtedly will be millions of conversations in America's living rooms this weekend about Roethlisberger's actions, including debates about whether he evaded more serious consequences because of his wealth and power.

There will also likely be considerable hand-wringing from many in Steeler Nation, who will cheer for their team with a troubled conscience, out of concern that their cheers could be construed as support for a man -- the team's quarterback and on-field leader -- with a disgraceful record of mistreating women.

The following talking points are designed to give parents, coaches and other adults some ideas about how to frame conversations with boys and young men (and girls and young women) about the Ben Roethlisberger case.

Our culture sends young people loads of mixed messages. On the one hand, many parents teach our kids to treat themselves and others with respect and dignity. Teachers, coaches, and religious leaders reinforce the message that "might doesn't make right," and that if you want to be a good and successful person, you must "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Over the past few years numerous states have passed anti-bullying laws, and school districts are increasingly implementing prevention programs on issues like dating violence and sexual assault.

On the other hand, any young person can look around and see that many men who abuse women (and other men) are nonetheless rewarded professionally and financially. This is true not only of athletes, but also of corporate executives, entertainers, politicians and others. How do we reconcile this seeming contradiction? In the case of Big Ben, we can say "Sure, he's a great quarterback, he's rich and famous. But do people respect him? Look at how carefully the television announcers choose their words when they talk about him. He might be a champion on the field. But beyond his football achievements, is he truly worthy of admiration?"

Big Ben created a huge mess as a result of his own actions. Big Ben has paid a price for his unacceptable behavior in the bathroom of a bar in Milledgeville, Georgia last year, when he allegedly sexually assaulted a 20-year-old woman. According to published accounts, the woman was extremely intoxicated when Roethlisberger accompanied her into the bathroom as his bodyguards stood at the door, blocking anyone from coming to the woman's assistance. Although Roethlisberger denies the rape allegation and no criminal charges were brought against him in the March 4, 2010 incident, the allegation was serious enough that he was suspended for four games by NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. His reputation as a person and a leader took a big hit. But let's remember that Big Ben is not the victim here. You could even say that he got off lightly, considering that he might have been charged with first-degree rape.

Sexual violence is a big problem in this country and it affects many of the girls -- and boys -- that you know. Approximately one in four girls and one in six boys will be a victim of sexual assault before the

age of 18. Think about your sister, your girlfriend or your mother. How would you feel if someone sexually assaulted her? Sadly, some of you have girls and women in your lives -- including members of your own families -- who have experienced sexual abuse and assault. This issue is personal for a lot of men. Young men, including football players and other student-athletes, have an important role to play in preventing it - especially by making it clear to your teammates and friends that mistreating anyone sexually is wrong, and that you will not tolerate it.

(Note: Parents, coaches, teachers and others can use personal anecdotes if they feel comfortable doing so, although it is important to remember not to disclose information about any victims without their explicit permission. An example of what they might say: "This issue is personal for me. I know women -- and men -- who are survivors of sexual violence. This isn't just happening somewhere else to someone we don't know. This is a problem that has surfaced in our community, in our family.")

Leadership in sports means leadership on and off the field. Ben Roethlisberger is a proven winner in athletic competition. But the measure of a true leader is how they conduct themselves 24/7, not just during a winning touchdown drive or a goal-line stance. Leadership isn't something that gets switched off because the game clock expires. Leadership doesn't 'just happen.' It isn't 'automatic.' It is something that is earned and exemplified (or illustrated) continually. Football fans across the country might respect Big Ben's ability to get it done on the field, but he has a long way to go to prove that he is worthy of their respect as a true leader and as a man.

Men who mistreat women verbally, physically or sexually are never proving their strength or manliness. Rather, they're revealing their belief in the deeply discredited and unacceptable idea that men are entitled to treat women as objects, like property, to be controlled, used and discarded. They're also displaying serious shortcomings in their character, flaws in their personality and/or cause for intervention or professional help.

According to various sources, including some who were quoted in *Sports Illustrated* last year after the Georgia sexual assault allegations surfaced, Big Ben was someone who routinely demonstrated "crudeness and immaturity" in his interpersonal behavior. He wasn't just boorish; he was also openly sexist. This is not how strong men act -- whether they're Super Bowl champions or average Joes.

Friends and teammates have an important role to play in interrupting and preventing violence against women. Eyewitness accounts from the incident last March revealed that Roethlisberger was surrounded by paid bodyguards and unpaid companions who failed to raise objections to his repeated sexist comments and aggressive behaviors toward women -- behaviors that *Sports Illustrated* and other media investigations alleged to be part of a long-standing pattern. One friend of the quarterback told *SI* that he shook his head when he saw Roethlisberger "disrespect" women in bars -- but it is tough to find anyone who ever went beyond head shaking and actually confronted the Steeler.

If you ever see a friend or teammate acting disrespectfully to women, or abusive in any way, don't just walk away. Say something, or do something, that communicates to him that you don't approve of his behavior. Get others to help you. Tell a team captain. Tell an adult in a position of authority. By stepping in, your actions could help prevent abusive behaviors and save your friend/teammate from ruining his life and reputation.

Alcohol does not cause men to assault women. Drinking alcohol may cause people to lose their inhibitions, and therefore facilitate abusive behavior. But it does not cause it. Saying "I was drunk" is not an excuse for coercing, abusing or committing violence against another person. Some people like to use alcohol as an excuse to no longer obey the rules, but ultimately you choose to drink. Alcohol does not cause violent behavior; it disinhibits it. It allows people to use it as an excuse to act out preexisting, anti-social feelings or beliefs. Anyone under the legal age should not be drinking. But if a person you know acts out in an aggressive and violent manner when he drinks, then he should stop drinking immediately. As peers, you need to support him and confront him if his drinking continues.

False reports of rape do occur, but they are rare. A lot of guys think women lie about being raped. They point to anecdotal incidents, such as the Duke lacrosse team fiasco and generalize about how common they think false reports really are. But false reports are rare, approximately 2 to 5 percent. In fact, according to the FBI, 75-80 percent of rapes are never reported. Women who have been raped - especially if the alleged perpetrator is a popular guy -- face incredible pressure from his friends (and sometimes hers) to remain silent.

Even the process of reporting is very difficult, embarrassing and painful. In addition, women who report rape are often the target of harassment, verbal abuse, and social ostracism. Think about it: why would women willingly bring all of that on themselves under false pretenses? In the vast majority of cases, women who report rape have been sexually assaulted - whether the district attorney decides to pursue criminal charges or not.

None of this excuses the actions of women -- or men -- who falsely report rape. If a young man is the victim of a false allegation, it can be a devastating and damaging experience. One suggestion - don't ever put yourself in a situation where sexual consent is not clear. If you have any doubts, stop. If you see a friend acting in a way that suggests he might not have consent, or if he is pursuing sex with a girl whose age or state of inebriation might preclude her from being able to consent, interrupt him, confront him and stop him.

Media depictions of men "scoring" with women are not the same as real life. The sexual scenarios many people have been exposed to online or in movies and magazines depict staged performances by paid actors and actresses. In real life, women don't enjoy being degraded and treated like objects/receptacles. It's not funny when men pressure women to drink too much and then coerce them into having sex. If men treat women the way they are treated in some Hollywood films, music videos or in most porn, they're not only being disrespectful, they might also find themselves committing acts of criminal sexual assault.

Your actions affect others. What each guy in a peer group does -- how he conducts himself in public, or in his relationships and interactions with girls - reflects not only on him and his family, but on his friends as well. In the case of student-athletes, what a member of the team does reflects on his teammates, his coaches, and the entire athletic program. In the Roethlisberger case, Big Ben not only damaged his own reputation, he also tarnished the image of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Young men owe it to the people around them to treat women -- and men -- with respect and dignity.

Ask yourself what matters most in life. Football is a very popular sport in this country. Millions of people have played it, and many millions more enjoy watching it and rooting on their favorite team. But there are more important things in life than football - or any sport. Maybe Big Ben's saga can prompt you to reflect on what is truly meaningful in your life and the lives of those around you. And perhaps this discussion can help to strengthen the resolve of more young men to treat women with respect and dignity and to speak out when they see others not treating them this way.

A version of these talking points is available at the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) web site, www.PCAR.org.

To see the original posting on *The Huffington Post*, and/or to make comments, go to:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jackson-katz/what-to-say-to-boys-and-y_b_817291.html