

Speaking Up

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The Family Violence Prevention Fund's News & Tips for the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Communities

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND THE SUPER BOWL: THE MYTH

On February 1, millions of people around the country will tune in to watch Super Bowl XXXVIII. In the past, Super Bowl Sunday has been a time of public debate over the prevalence of domestic violence in our society, partly because of unsubstantiated claims that incidents of abuse increase on game day. Last year, for example, George Will raised the issue on ABC's *This Week*. On the program, Will criticized "feminists" for spreading false information about the link between the Super Bowl and domestic violence, and told women to "relax and enjoy the game."

This year, due in part to the Kobe Bryant rape trial and other incidents of violence involving professional athletes, public attention may once again turn to the link between professional sports and violence against women. But advocates for victims stress that there is no conclusive evidence proving that violence against women increases during the Super Bowl.

"Violence against women is wrong whether it happens on Super Bowl Sunday or on any other Sunday throughout the year," said Family Violence Prevention Fund President Esta Soler. "While there have been no rigorous national studies on whether rates of domestic violence increase during the Super Bowl, we do know that women are beaten and killed every day by the men in their lives – whether there is a football game or not."

The Myth

The Super Bowl and domestic violence probably became entwined in Americans' minds in 1993, when advocates helped convince the NBC television network to broadcast a public service announcement (PSA) on domestic violence during its Super Bowl coverage. The PSA featured a well-dressed man sitting in a jail cell saying, "I didn't think you'd go to jail for hitting your wife." Afterwards, the announcer said, "Domestic violence is a crime."

Violence Against Women and the Super Bowl: The Myth

While many commentators applauded NBC's decision to air the PSA, others claimed the network had been coerced by inflated claims about Super Bowl Sunday being "a day of dread" for battered women – a day when abuse increases. That same year, in a front page story entitled, "Debunking the 'Day of Dread' for Women," *Washington Post* reporter Ken Ringle quoted experts and battered women's advocates saying there was no discernable increase in battering on Super Bowl Sunday, or on any days when football games are played. Some later claimed that Ringle had taken their remarks out of context.

Although there are claims linking sports broadcasts to increased violence and abuse, **no rigorous national studies have confirmed a link**. A limited study conducted by the Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center at UCLA's School of Public Health found that football Sundays in general are *not* significantly associated with increased domestic violence dispatch calls.

Athletes and Violence

Soler noted that the media coverage surrounding the Bryant trial and other violence allegedly committed by professional athletes have helped to link professional sports to violence in some Americans' minds. In a series of articles related to the Bryant trial, *USA Today* identified 168 allegations of sexual assault involving 164 athletes and former athletes in the past 12 years. Of those allegations, the paper found that only 22 saw the cases go to trial and just six cases resulted in convictions.

"Because professional athletes are so much in the public eye, if they do commit violence against women, the media tends to report it," said Soler. "But, as public figures, athletes are in a unique position to take a stand against violence against women. And many are doing just that. We commend the professional athletes who are helping to raise awareness about abuse and doing their part to end violence against women."