

# Athletes are people too; stop treating them like gods



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Sports  
Commentary

The cult of the athlete is huge in this city. As we saw last year, NHL players who are paid millions of dollars per year have the power to captivate an entire nation. Even 16 years after Messier left the City of Champions, the mythology surrounding his tenure in this city was resurrected, the same day Oilers fans all but wept when Smyth was traded.

But at a school like the University of Alberta, athletes don't have the same ability to bring campus together. While smaller university campuses around Canada and the US centre around sporting events, at best, only a small fraction of the U of A student population is present at games. With the Oilers, Eskimos and Rush,

students have other sporting outlets away from the University.

Without detracting from the Bears' and Pandas' athletic accomplishments, which have been considerable, student athletes are valuable to the University largely as a marketing tool. As a result, this University has some of the best teams in the country. Recent men's hockey losses aside, with every CIS championship they're a portable brand that can bring the U of A into homes across the country.

This is nothing against the athletes—many of whom I consider to be friends—but a condemnation of how we treat them. They're friends, classmates, colleagues and peers, not a group that should be looked at apart from the rest of the student body. It's this perception that creates inflated egos and unnecessary reverence.

In response to the attention they get from the school and fans alike, we automatically project value onto athletes—specifically male athletes—because we're so used to them holding celebrity status in our culture. It's

not based on individuals, individual talent or even individual personalities. Problems arise when this reverence moves off the court and out of the Butterdome.

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Student athletes are indeed talented—they're also fortunate enough to excel at a sport that people enjoy. They deserve praise because they work hard, sustain an academic average and devote hours to something they care about, so give them full

marks for dedication. But they're really no different than the thousands of other students who balance coursework with a part-time job in order to afford to go to school. They're no more worthy of recognition than the people who volunteer to help their community. They don't do anything more extraordinary than what students with disabilities face on a daily basis.

The way athletes are valued is gender-based as well. Perceptions of male athletes are generally sexualized as testosterone-fuelled male ideals. They're literally the Big Men On Campus. Even when men's and women's teams exhibit similar skill levels and success, men's games inevitably draw the biggest crowds—after all, they're faster, stronger and better, right? Meanwhile, female athletes are caught somewhere in between, not masculine enough to live up to their male counterparts' standards but masculine enough to be considered "butch"—with the exception of some overtly sexualized teams of course

(think volleyball spandex here).

As well, female athletes are often valued not because of their own accomplishments, but rather their association with male athletes. For some people, hooking up with the entire roster becomes a mark of distinction in itself. Our culture makes it socially acceptable and even commendable for women to get played.

Valuing athletes just because they're part of a varsity team cultivates a culture of entitlement that rewards people based on an imagined status. It has nothing to do with athletic talent or standings. While some people glory in perceived stereotypes, not every locker-room frequenter is cocky, callous or promiscuous. In fact, not every player wants to be associated with their sport's label, or even that of their teammates. When some people do use the title as an excuse to live up to perceptions, they justify blanketing the rest of the team. But as most varsity athletes—and friends of varsity athletes—know, they aren't that special after all.

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Manute Bol is hardly minute at all.

He's also involved himself in various volunteer work over the years—most of it benefitting his homeland of Sudan. While writing for the *Gateway* isn't quite as noble a volunteer opportunity, it is a great way to meet new people, develop your writing skills and even write about the Golden Bears and Pandas—some of who almost reach Manute's armpits. So stop by a sports meeting at 5pm on Tuesdays and hang out, reminisce about the time Manute fought the Fridge and maybe even pick up an assignment. Manute would appreciate it.

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