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# Kobe's case serves as lesson for pro athletes

By CLAUDIA FELDMAN  
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Lakers star Kobe Bryant faces a sexual assault charge



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Once a week, the newest members of the Houston Texans attend a class in "life skills."

Monday's session might have been renamed "sex ed for young millionaire hunks who play professional sports" or "how not to be Kobe Bryant."

Bryant is the 25-year-old professional basketball player charged this summer with raping a 19-year-old at a resort in Colorado. Today, he will enter a courtroom for a continuation of a preliminary hearing to determine whether he will stand trial for felony sexual assault.

The Los Angeles Lakers guard, married and father of a young daughter, says he is guilty of adultery but innocent of rape. The sexual encounter, he says, was consensual. If convicted, however, he faces a possible prison term of four years to life.

It's classic, the-higher-you-climb, the-harder-you-fall kind of stuff.

In the United States, sexual assaults take place thousands of times a day, but many are never reported. Perhaps because of their celebrity, athletes feel more vulnerable to potential complaints.

"It's part of the gig," says Houston Texans center Steve McKinney.

"Society puts us on a pedestal. We have an opportunity to do things normal people don't get to do. We're VIPs at

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clubs. We're behind stage at concerts. We have people coming out of the woodwork wanting to hang out and take us places.

"But everything we do is magnified 20 times. That's why we have to be very careful. We can't even come close to crossing the line."

Or there is hell to pay.

"Terrified" is the word Bryant has used to describe his feelings about the sexual assault case.

The young men in the plush lecture hall in the innards of Reliant Stadium also look concerned. Sex educator Michael Domitrz paces in front of them, discussing the year's most talked about sports story and asking the young NFL players to examine their own sexual behavior.

Domitrz tells his own story: He was in college and enjoying sex with little thought of consequences when he returned to his room one day and found a note, "Mike, call home immediately."

He did. And in a strained voice, his mother asked if he was sitting down. His youngest sister had been raped earlier in the day.

First, Domitrz says, he wanted to kill the man who hurt his sister. Then he started to ask himself some tough questions.

"Sexual assault is any sexual contact

without consent," Domitrz says. "The rapist, he did something without permission. Then I looked at myself in the mirror."

He had enjoyed a number of sexual conquests. "Did I have permission?" Domitrz asked the rookie players. "And if I didn't, what was the difference between the rapist and me? Guys, you make the moves, you take control, and you think the girl will stop if she wants to. But sometimes, it's too scary for them. It's too late. You're bigger, more powerful."

Ellen Cohen, president and CEO of the Houston Area Women's Center, says that most sexual assault cases don't wind up in court or even in a police report. But when rich, high-profile sports figures make the same mistake, it might. Cohen also notes that only 2 percent to 4 percent of alleged victims file false reports.

Neither Domitrz nor Cohen can know if Bryant is innocent or guilty. They think, however, that most of the media coverage has been misdirected.

Says Domitrz, "The questions have been, 'Why was she in his room? What did she do to stop him?' The question should be, 'What did he do to get consent?' We're protecting Kobe. We're saying, 'Kobe could never do this.' But this is not about liking Kobe. This is about consent. Did he have consent?"

"My message is this: Have respect for your partner and for yourself. Ask

permission. Talk to her. That's also the safest path."

It's tough, Domitrz says, to stop in the heat of passion and check with your partner. "Do you want this?" "May I kiss you?" "May I touch you here and there?"

Tough, but not impossible.

He teaches the players how to ask. He plays the man. He plays the woman. He cracks jokes. The dozen players are absorbed in the talk. They're participating. They're even giggling. They're imagining themselves asking.

"Women love to be asked," Domitrz says. "Ask a woman if you can kiss her and she might kiss you."

But Domitrz is mostly business.

"You say you can't stop?" he asks, disbelieving. "What if she whispers in your ear, 'I have a deadly venereal disease?' Then you can stop."

You have to communicate, he says, even if you find a flirty woman in your hotel room and you want sex.

"What are we?" he asks. "Human beings or animals?"

It's time to wrap it up. Domitrz thanks the players for their rapt attention. He hands out free copies of his book, *May I Kiss You?* (Awareness Publications, \$15.95), and he autographs them, too.

Andre Johnson, the Texans' 22-year-old *wunderkind* receiver, leaves the room thoughtfully. He's young but not clueless.

"I'm thinking about that question, 'Do I have consent.' "

In the moment, he says, it's easy to forget. But from the look of resolve on his face, he will be remembering from now on.

In the Texans' dressing room, just across the hall, older players are talking about the Bryant case.

"Let justice prevail," says return specialist J.J. Moses. "I keep Bible study in the center of my life; otherwise, everything would be somewhat chaotic."

Moses says the fast lives of pro athletes are often exaggerated in the movies and on television. Still, players tend to forget to spend their money carefully, treat everybody equally and avoid temptation.

"Myself, I just don't go to clubs," he says.

McKinney doesn't, either. He explains he's a husband and a dad and he'd rather be home with his family than out carousing. Besides, he doesn't want to read about himself on the front page.

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