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3-4-2000

Initiation Rituals

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Initiation Rituals" (2000). *On Sport and Society*. 269.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/269>



SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
March 4, 2000

It is called the "elephant walk," an all male single-file procession in the nude in which all participants are connected in a chain by holding on to the penis of the person just behind. This is not a new sport, but it is a part of the sporting atmosphere in many male athletic settings. Most recently this charming ritual was in the news at the University of Vermont where the hockey season has come to an abrupt end.

In addition to the elephant walk freshman hockey players were made to appear at a party with painted toe and fingernails, and wearing thongs. At some point they were blindfolded and naked dancers rubbed against them. They were told these were male dancers, but in fact they were females.

Around the same time at a Connecticut high school the wrestling program was closed down after a 15 year old sophomore was hog-tied, slammed into a wall, put into a gymnasium locker, and had teammates force a plastic knife into his rectum.

This is about camaraderie. This is about manhood. This is called hazing. And this is not new.

I find all of this more than a bit strange, a twisted representation of what it means to be human. But in its many forms hazing has been around for centuries and it is a fundamental tradition in the military, in athletics, in fraternities and sororities, and in clubs of all sorts. It is done by and to men, women and children. It is often endured without complaint and most commonly comes to light when an injury or death results. Hazing is a crime in 41 states. Nonetheless it thrives.

Hazing has been a common part of the college scene since at least the Middle Ages, with documentation of hazing incidents to be found in the 14th century. Thomas Aquinas mentions it as part of campus life. It has existed in the American military academies since their inception. General George McClellan endured his hazing in manly silence when he was a freshman at West Point. At the turn of the 20th century a hazing scandal engulfed West Point and was the subject of a Congressional Investigation. General George C. Marshall endured a particularly brutal form of hazing and suffered a severe injury to the groin area from a bayonet.

Hazing has been in the news frequently over the last few years and in 1998-99 Alfred University in New York did a major study of Initiation Rites involving NCAA athletics. In that survey only 12% reported that they had been hazed as part of their athletic activity but 80% (a quarter million) reported to have experienced at least one kind of behavior that was defined in the study as constituting hazing.

Hazing is often associated with alcohol and half of those in the study reported that they had been forced to participate in drinking contests or alcohol-related hazing. Two-thirds were subjected to some form of humiliation, and 10 percent were required to commit a criminal act.

Swimmers, divers, lacrosse and soccer players were most likely to have been hazed. Football players were most likely to experience dangerous or illegal hazing. Women were more likely to be involved in alcohol related hazing. Campuses in the East and West had the most alcohol related hazing, while those in the Midwest and South were most likely to have dangerous or illegal hazing.

I must say I have never quite figured out what all of this has to do with anything, but then one assumes that it would not have such widespread usage across time and across cultures if it didn't fill some basic human need. These activities are related to initiation rites associated with societies in less developed parts of the world, and in fact are a part of most clubs or organizations in all parts of the world. The rites often have a functional role. The Masai sent young men to the forest to kill a lion as a rite of passage and this had some social value. Whether this is replicated by locking a teenager in a closet for several hours is doubtful. Putting anyone through sexual or physical humiliation seems not to serve any useful social purpose anywhere.

Yet these activities are routinely carried out with little or no objection. Even in the Connecticut high school case it is apparent that forms of initiation, many involving hazing, were a part of the local traditions. One boy's father recalled that the sort of activity which produced the current problems had been practiced for at least three decades and were an accepted and expected part of the athletic scene.

At the University of Vermont many of the hockey team feel that they have been mistreated by the university and do not believe that they have done anything wrong. They were building team

togetherness and team chemistry. This is what makes a team. It is hard to fathom that someone could think that tying up a teammate and bouncing them off a wall would bring togetherness. It is a little easier to think that the elephant walk might bring a feeling of a certain kind of twisted closeness.

I must say I have never been able to figure out how humiliation, physical or psychological, could build anything. But it seems to and some coaches build their coaching philosophy around it. They are in turn lauded as great leaders and builders of character.

That may be the most troublesome part of this entire business.

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