
CFL

CFL's new violence against women policy puts support for victims first

By: [Gary Lawless](#)
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Winnipeg Blue Bombers' new home Investors Group Field. (John Woods / Winnipeg Free Press files)

Janay Rice was knocked out by Ray Rice's fist in the winter of 2014 and the immediate widespread response was how the perpetrator's football career would be affected.

Twitter, mainstream media, the NFL and its fans barely paused to step over the unconscious figure of Janay Rice to begin the conversation on how games and the career of a Super Bowl champion running back would be altered.

The victim existed only as the smoking gun and, as is so often the case in domestic violence, had little impact on the matter. This was about Ray Rice. His soon-to-be wife and victim was secondary. And not a close second.

The CFL, often an afterthought on the landscape of North American pro sport, is now the leader and a shining example of how leagues should deal with their employees and privileged stars in matters of domestic violence. They're putting the victim first and even better, they're trying to prevent violence against women in their workplace.

Violence against women is a societal issue and shouldn't be treated in the context of how many games a player will miss. How does suspending a player help the victim? How does a suspension prevent the next victim from being hit?

PUTTING THE VICTIM FIRST

The CFL announced its first-ever violence against women policy on Thursday.

Here are key elements of the policy:

- The policy applies to everyone who works for the CFL – not just players, but coaches, officials, executives and staff.
- Everyone in the CFL will receive mandatory training on violence against women and the surrounding issues on an annual basis.
- The CFL will support,

Certainly, when a professional athlete strikes a woman, there should be consequences. But the first reaction should be to ensure the victim's safety and well-being.

The CFL announced its first policy on violence against woman Thursday with the stated aim to "prevent violence in the first place, respond quickly on behalf of those harmed when it does occur, provide help to those affected by it and seek behaviour change from anyone found to be perpetrating violence."

All of pro sports is late getting to this issue but the CFL got it right. Sure, as time moves forward we'll find flaws. But for a first step, this is groundbreaking and better than anything we've seen in sport.

The NHL has no stated policy, and most programs are reactive while the CFL's is decidedly proactive.

CFL senior management drafted the policy in conjunction with frontline workers and it shows.

"Whether there is 'proof' of an allegation or not, no report will be ignored. Every situation will be assessed, with experts called in when necessary, and help will always be offered," states the release.

Women and their statements will be taken seriously. Very often, the burden of proof is placed on the victim, and victims are often met with skepticism.

The policy's pro-active approach and focus on the victims, which makes it strong and forward-thinking, could also be viewed as a weakness. Sanctions are necessary and must be an absolute in clear-cut cases of domestic violence. The policy has brains and a heart. It must prove to have teeth as well.

The CFL began looking at drafting a policy shortly after the Ray Rice incident in 2014 under then commissioner Mark Cohon and continued the work under new commissioner Jeffrey Orridge. The league didn't huddle its GMs or competition committee but contacted women's groups instead, including Ending Violence Association of Canada, and asked for their input and guidance.

"The leadership being shown today by the entire CFL is to be applauded profoundly," said Tracy Porteous, the chair of Ending Violence Association of Canada. "Violence against women has long thrived in the shadows so when organizations, especially those led by men, step forward to ask, 'What can we do to break the silence?' it shines an important light on a subject most people don't know what to do with. Through this policy the CFL is changing history."

The CFL's admitting its own ignorance on the issue led to success. They knew they were ill-prepared to write policy. They spent time and money. This isn't lip service and an attempt to curry favour. This is a push for change and an opportunity for a professional sports league to use its podium for the betterment of society.

"In talking with women's groups, we were struck by the fact that they put the emphasis on protection and support for a woman at risk, and supporting behaviour change on the part of perpetrators, while others can tend to measure a policy purely by how tough or punitive it is," Orridge said. "For example, the women we worked with on the policy spoke to us more about

endorse and participate in efforts to increase awareness of violence against women and ways to prevent it throughout society, and in particular among Canadian youth.

- When any CFL workplace, including a CFL football club or one of its corporate offices, receives a report of violence against women involving a CFL employee, we will act.
- We will assess the situation and future risk to the women in question, and engage when necessary local experts who will make up violence against women response teams (VAWR teams). These VAWR teams will be made up of social workers and other professionals with extensive experience in dealing with violence against women.
- These VAWR teams will provide the best possible support and referrals to the women affected, ensure counselling is provided where it is deemed helpful to the men involved, and will strive to act always in the best interests of any children involved.
- We will always err on the side of safety, respect for the sanctity of human life, and every person's inherent right to security from harm.
- We will not act as criminal

whether a woman's life could be at risk, than whether her spouse was going to be punished. In fact, some said that removing an employee's ability to make a living could affect his ability to provide child support, which would negatively affect his former partner and their kids."

The devil, however, is in the details. A policy is just words. How it is enforced and executed is key. That's how it will be judged.

So this is a great first step. The CFL has our attention. Now make it work. Make us believers.

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You can see [the full report here](#).

investigators, fact finders, judges or juries: our focus is on providing access to experts who can intervene in a situation, assess the risk to the woman, mitigate any harm in the best way possible, seek behaviour change on the part of perpetrators and contribute to positive outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

- In cases where there are clear and documented cases of violence against women – determined by the police, the courts, or confirmed by the perpetrator – the CFL will impose sanctions.
- The CFL will also impose sanctions when there has been a clear violation of protection orders or other directives put in place by the courts or police, as such violations are clear indications of higher risks of violence.
- These sanctions will range from suspension for single or multiple games to a lifetime ban from the CFL, depending on the severity and number of incidences.
- In determining sanctions, the commissioner will consult a list of offences, including sexual assault, domestic violence, and violation of protection orders or other directives provided by the courts or

police, as well as guidelines prepared in consultation with experts on violence against women.

- These sanctions will be subject to the provisions and processes of the league's collective bargaining agreement with its players, and in the case of other employees, their employment agreements and employment law.

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HISTORY

Updated on Thursday, August 6, 2015 at 3:14 PM CDT: Updated 9:12 PM: write-through

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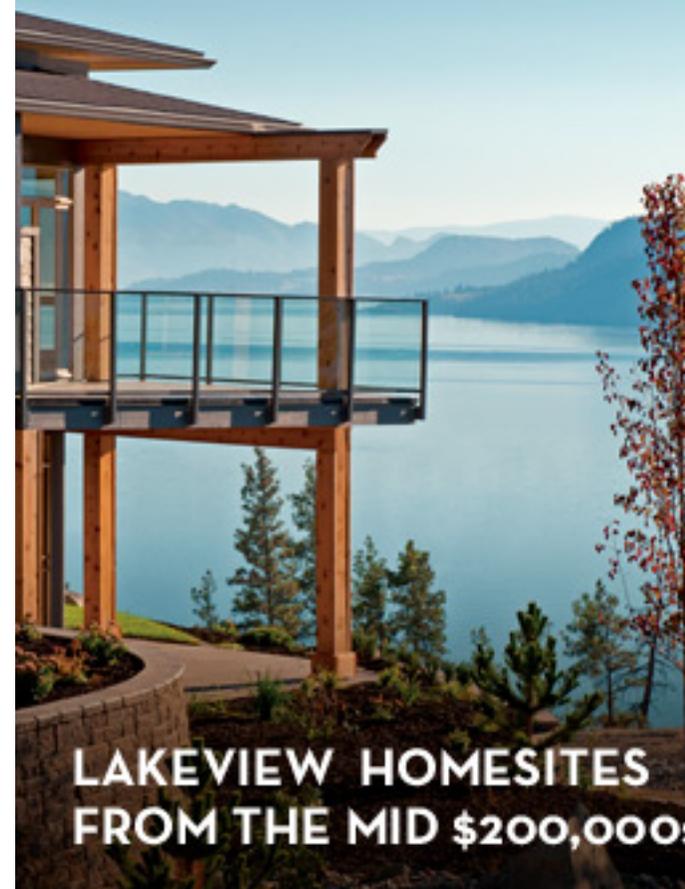
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