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CFL tackles problem of violence against women

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(From left to right) Stephanie Cadieux, Minister for Children and Family Development, BC Government, Jeffrey L Orridge, CFL Commissioner, and Tracy Porteous, Chair, Ending Violence Association BC, during the CFL's violence against women policy media conference in Vancouver, British Columbia on August 6, 2015. MARKETWIRED PHOTO/Canadian Football League

The chairwoman of a national anti-violence against women group says the CFL not only deserves heaps of praise for the policy it announced Thursday, but it made history as well.

“Never before have we seen a national organization, let alone a national organization led by men that's a professional sports organization, take such a bold step to say that violence against women is not all right,” said Tracy Porteous, chair of Ending Violence Association of Canada. “... I have never been involved in something as important, as exciting, as the announcement today.”

B.C., Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Toronto already have programs that were created to end every kind of violence against women, but now the CFL will become heavily involved if anyone under its umbrella – players, coaches or team staff members – is accused of violence against women.

The league's first such policy will allow for commissioner Jeffrey Orridge to suspend or even ban for life anyone found guilty of violence against women, depending on the severity of the offence.

Violence against women hasn't been an issue in the CFL in recent years, but the same can't be said of the NFL. Which begs the question: Why did the CFL decide to tackle this topic?

“It's a really important issue, and it is one of those issues in society that is pervasive unfortunately,” Orridge said. “Because of the work that many of our member teams have been doing for years and years – the B.C. Lions actually led the way on this issue – the time was right for the organization as a whole to step up and create a policy to further amplify what the teams had been doing on their own.”

The league policy isn't in place only to dish out punishment. In fact, after meeting with those who deal with those who deal with the ugly issue every day, the CFL will ensure it focuses more on the victim. The main intent of the policy is “to assess the risk, reduce or eliminate that risk, mitigate harm and promote positive change.” Local anti-violence experts will be brought in for consultation and to provide support if the situation warrants it.

Everyone in the CFL will receive mandatory training on violence against women and the issues surrounding it on an annual basis, and teams will focus on getting the message out to youth that violence against women will not be tolerated.

“Unfortunately in today’s world we all don’t have the kind of role models that we’d like,” said B.C. Lions president Dennis Skulsky, whose organization started the Don’t Be a Bystander program in 2011 when Porteous approached it with the idea. “That’s just the way the way the world is.”

Winnipeg Blue Bombers defensive tackle Kashawn Fraser learned the hard way that violence against women is a serious offence. He pleaded no contest to domestic violence charges after a January 2011 incident with his college girlfriend and received nine months of probation. He was also suspended for two games the following fall, also in part to a drunk driving conviction.

SUN+ Second year pro said he has “grown as a man” since 2011, and he now spreads the message of anti-violence to kids he trains and mentors in his Florida hometown during the CFL off-season.

“I have a lot of kids that are going to college, and I can share my experiences with them,” Fraser said. “I work with a lot of underprivileged kids. I work at a non-profit organization in Florida, so when I talk to kids I can tell them my experiences, tell them the mistakes I’ve made and how you learn from them.”

Fraser was in college when he was convicted, and since then he has become a contributing member of society. That’s why he made it into head coach Mike O’Shea’s locker-room.

“What we do is we make sure we fill our locker-room with good character people and then we talk about respect,” O’Shea said when asked if he discusses violence against women specifically with his players. “We talk about making the right decisions. We talk about understanding the community you’re in, how important this team is to the community and conducting yourself accordingly.”

Now, if any member of any CFL organization forgets to respect women, a policy is in place to deal with the situation immediately and deeply.

“I can say for many women across the country,” Porteous said, “we are giving thanks to the CFL and to the commissioner himself for being as bold as you have been today.”

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