

# ATTABOY!

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# 1



## MASKS AND MASCULINITY





**VANS**  
"OFF THE WALL"

# THE EDITOR'S LETTER



**T**here is not an ideal male archetype, and if there was, it wouldn't be Donald Trump or Boris Johnson or any other male leader who envision themselves as almighty or unyielding.

Inspired by Trump's refusal to wear a hygiene mask, Attaboy has commissioned a photo essay entitled, *Masks and Masculinity*, featuring men from all over the world, proudly displaying their facial coverings.

Inside these pages, you won't find any adverts for Rolex watches or sultry photoshoots that objectify women. Instead, you will read content that empowers men to be nurturing, caring and compassionate.

Our case study on the experiences of men in female-dominated roles explores the idea that more men in nursing, teaching and social work could inspire future generations to dismantle harmful gender stereotypes.

In a feature called *Injury Time*, we speak to five men who have had to give up something they love because of a serious injury, whether that be a person, job or lifelong hobby.

These are just some of the highlights in our pilot issue, as we explore the concept of masks and masculinity.

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# A VIRTUAL REALITY CALLED FIFA

## it's in the game

Read about one man's total immersion into a football simulation game, thanks to an unlikely endorsement from the W.H.O

Text James Bayley Illustration by Liam Johnstone

**A**s the U.K. initiated lockdown due to the Coronavirus outbreak, the World Health Organisation (W.H.O.) backed an initiative entitled #PlayApartTogether. This was in late March, and the scheme urged people to stay indoors and play video games.

Ironically, the W.H.O. classified 'gaming disorder' or video game addiction as a disease just over a year ago.

As a former gaming enthusiast, I decided to conduct an experiment to see if my old bad habits would resurface and whether my behaviour would fall into the category of gaming disorder. Considering the W.H.O.'s recent u-turn, there was no better time to explore this type of addiction, and whether it is a problem at all.

In the interest of protecting our N.H.S. and saving lives, I dipped into my savings. I bought a brand new Playstation 4 from Argos, which was mercifully still open for essential purchases.

I only needed one game to accompany my new console, FIFA 20, a football simulation video game.

In my youth, I played on many instalments of the FIFA series. Back then, I still harboured dreams of becoming a real-life footballer, and FIFA allowed me to live out those fantasies. I would create a virtual pro in my image, and he would play alongside real-life footballers in fully licensed kits to packed out stadiums across the world.

As a teenager, I would spend days on end playing this game in an attempt to avoid schoolwork and conceal my acne-ridden face from the world.

I grew out of excessive gaming habits when I reached university, I attribute this to a good social life and my skin finally clearing up.

The format and controls of FIFA had hardly changed from when I last played the game all those years ago. The first thing I did was create my virtual pro or avatar.

I began adjusting the appearance of my avatar to look more like me. This is the most essential part of the game as the more like myself the avatar looks; the more I completely lose myself in the world. It also presents an opportunity to improve myself,

so I decided to give my avatar a strong jaw and a generous hairline.

After adjusting my avatar's appearance, I selected his kit options. I had his shirt tucked in and his sleeves long rather than short, as this is how I wore my shirt when I played for my local village team. The shorts were one standard-setting, which really frustrated me because my avatar would've ideally worn short shorts in homage to the football fashion of the 1980s. To compensate for this, I put his sock height on the lowest setting possible, thus revealing more leg and creating the look of short shorts. My virtual pro's boots were black Mizuno Rebula's because no one else wears them, and my avatar is a footballing trailblazer.

The next step in the creation process is to determine my avatar's attributes. The key here is to be good enough to hit the ground running while having enough room for improvement. I need to keep things interesting for 15 seasons (That's how long the career mode is).

I like to make my real-life attributes the template for this process, and then exaggerate my strengths and weaknesses to bring my avatar up to the required professional standard. This explains why my avatar was good at short passes but was frequently injured.

Back when I used to play the game, my avatar would be the youngest player on the game, but I am 26 now, it wouldn't make sense for my virtual pro to begin his playing career during his prime years.

The fact that there were real-life footballers in the game playing alongside my avatar was part of the enormous appeal of the game for me. Although, the moment those real-life players became younger than my fictional avatar made the illusion slightly less believable.

At this point, any sane person would either put their controller down or continue to play the game without reimagining their life as a professional footballer like a narcissist.

Despite my better judgement, I decided to commit to the fantasy further. I began to imagine my avatar's life beyond the video game I was playing. I brainstormed different background

“The more like myself  
the avatar looks; the  
more I completely  
lose myself in the  
world.”





James Bayley playing for Liverpool in the 2025 Community Shield vs Manchester City.

stories for my avatar to justify why he was slightly older than the other emerging talents in European football.

The more my origin story could reflect my real life, the easier it would be to immerse myself into the narrative. As a result, inspired by my own persistent knee injuries, I imagined that my avatar's career was curtailed at a young age because of knee ligament damage. To add insult to injury, I envisioned that my avatar was released from his club, Ajax Amsterdam, without any potential suitors.

This is the point in the article where I stop referring to my 'avatar' as an 'avatar' and instead discuss my 'avatar's' journey in the first person. It's easier that way. It's easier to pretend that this is real life.

I was damaged goods, football was all I'd ever known, and now I had no place to go. Humbled and depressed, I moved back to my hometown in Leicester and started to plan for my future, but deep down, I had no plan B.

With the help of a few friends, I compiled several short videos demonstrating my footballing skills to send to clubs. My agent quit after Ajax released me, so it was up to me to reach out to the footballing community. I used various social media channels using #SignUpBayley. One club responded, the German second division Hamburg based side F.C. St Pauli.

Despite only experiencing modest success on the field, St Pauli is famous for its support of left-wing politics. I was only too happy to get the call from them. St Pauli guided me through several seasons of gruelling physiotherapy as I learnt to play the game with my head first and my feet second.

By the 2019/2020 season, I was an integral part of the St Pauli first team, and my career flourished after that.

Two (real) months later, I had completed the career mode, the game sent an automated message congratulating me on a glorious career. It then returned to the startup menu, where I could either start another career mode or wait for the next game to come out.

It had become a lockdown tradition, to emerge from my room

in the morning with moderately bloodshot eyes caused by an overindulgence of FIFA from the night before. This was more than just a video game to me. When I was in my room absorbed by this fantasy, nothing else mattered. I had no worries or concerns as long as I was performing on the pitch. I often found myself in bed trying to get to sleep, or in the bath, or on the toilet, thinking about my career mode, mulling over transfers, wondering where to move next. Should I stay with St Pauli? I have a good relationship with the manager and a genuine connection with the city. Or what about Strasbourg? My wife and kids could stay in London, and I could return home during the international breaks.

Over the last few weeks, it had occurred to me that I was more obsessed with this video game than ever before. I prescribed myself classical music to listen to while playing the matches, in an attempt to elevate what I was doing into a more sophisticated hobby. This did not work; I only occasionally acknowledged the irony of what I was doing. The rest of the time, I was concentrating on getting St Pauli through to the semi-final of the German Cup. Sometimes I would have to quit and restart the game to ensure I scored the winning goal. I even

bought myself a posture corrector to wear while I played the game, to ease my back troubles.

When you get lost in a good book, nothing else outside of your engagement with the narrative matters. That's the appeal of it, you can relate to the protagonist and imagine how you would behave in their circumstances. Since lockdown, I have had a similar relationship with FIFA, except in FIFA, my stimulus isn't someone else's protagonist; I am the protagonist.

For me writing this piece was cathartic, and made me realise just how unfulfilling my gaming habits had become. There's nothing wrong with having the occasional tap on the pads during a lockdown, but to use that as the framework for an alternative reality can't be healthy. Playing endless hours of FIFA won't expand my knowledge or amplify my creativity, and in that way, it's nothing like a good book.

**“Sometimes I would have to quit and restart the game to ensure I scored the winning goal.”**



**IF YOU KEEP  
RE-READING  
THIS OAT  
DRINK  
AD YOU  
MIGHT  
GET  
TIRED  
OF IT.**



# THE EXPERIENCES of men in female- dominated roles

Attaboy spoke to three men who are soon to embark on a career in a female-dominated industry, to find out why so few men have followed in their path.

By James Bayley

**W**omen have made significant progress entering male-dominated jobs such as finance, law and medicine over the last few decades. Men, on the other hand, have made far less progress entering female-dominated jobs like those of primary school teachers, nurses, and social workers. To address this imbalance, society needs to motivate more men to pursue careers they may not have considered ten or twenty years ago. Rather than speak to men already established in female-dominated roles, we got in touch with three students who are soon to embark on their new careers, to inspire other like-minded readers and combat gender stereotypes head-on.

Lorenzo Della Volpe is a 22-year-old nursing student from Pisa, Italy. After graduating in September 2020, he will enter a healthcare industry drastically different from the one he signed up for.

He says, "It will be even more difficult to encourage people to become nurses in a post-pandemic world. Every day, nurses are in close contact with people of ill health, you are constantly at risk."

Lorenzo will soon be one of just 20 per cent of nurses in Italy who are male. These numbers are similar across Europe and the UK. He hopes the media's recent fixation with frontline workers will encourage more men to become nurses. He says, "In today's society there are few people who know what a nurse is capable of, or what their job entails."

He adds, "If more men understood the responsibilities of a nurse, such as administering drugs under intense pressure,

then maybe they would be more inclined to pursue a career in it, because they would have more respect for the job nurses do."

The weekly applause for the NHS has already dwindled, and the free meals will soon expire. Society is beginning to forget the healthcare workers it once hero-worshipped. For Lorenzo that isn't a problem, he says, "Nurses are not 'heroes' but people who have chosen to dedicate their life 100 per cent to help other people."

He adds, "It makes me angry that nurses are only considered to be heroes during a national crisis."

For Lorenzo, there has always been an innate passion inside of him, to help other people. He says, "I started to get closer to the healthcare community thanks to the Italian Red Cross. But the real reason I decided to become a nurse was when my grandmother got sick in 2016. From then on I decided to expand my interests in the health field, my end goal is to be able to help people in the same way I wanted to help my grandmother when she was in need."

However, Lorenzo is in the minority. Simply put, most boys don't grow up wanting to become nurses. For Lorenzo, this has to do with the way men and women are represented by the media he says, "In Italy, and I suspect in England too, nurses are still mostly portrayed by women on TV and in films."

In the UK, female terms such as 'matron' and 'sister', still reverberate around hospital corridors. Gender-neutral terminology could help move things a step in the right direction, but so much more needs to be done.

The NHS has been recognised for its diversity, although if it truly wants to reflect society then it needs to address its gender

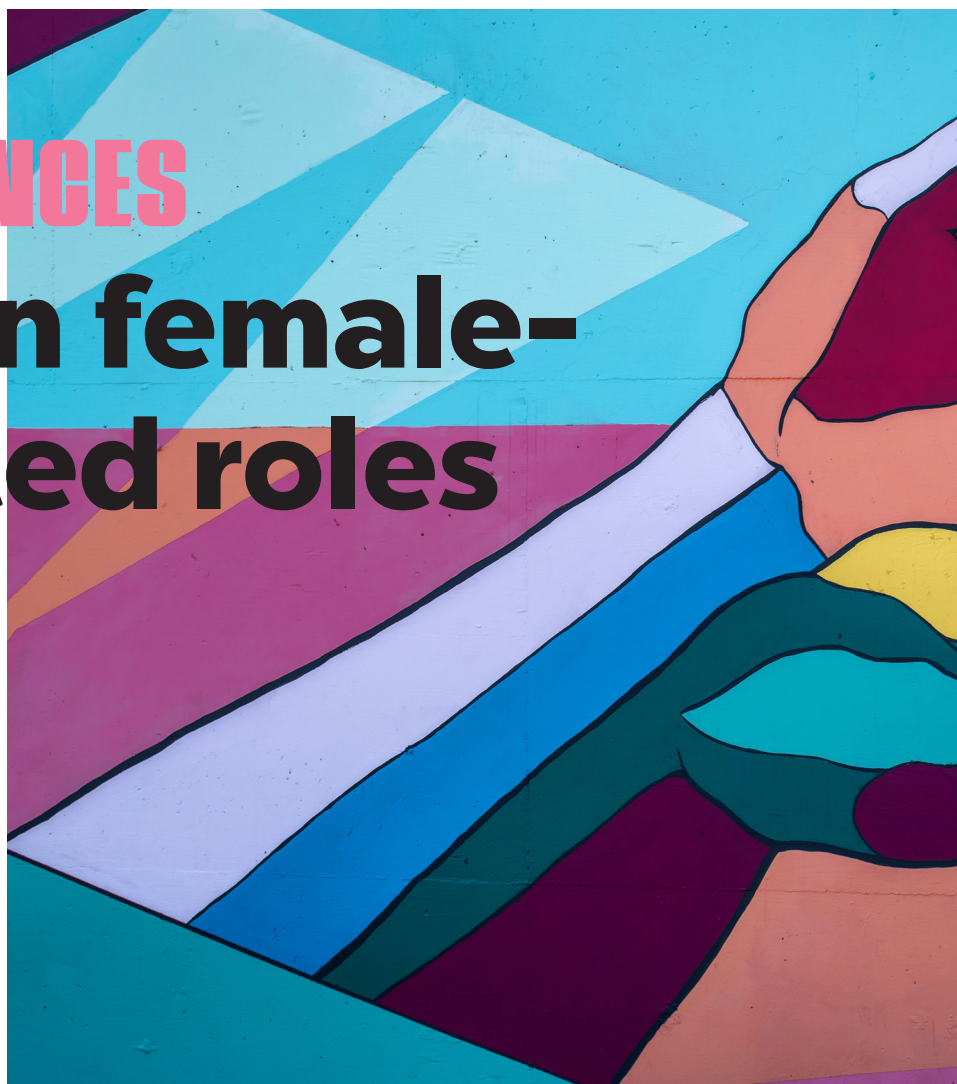


Image by Tim Mossholder



He adds, “Students respond more to teachers who are passionate about their jobs.”

Statistically, you are much more likely to encounter a male headmaster or secondary school teacher, rather than a primary school teacher. There is a perception, that the older the students are, the more authoritative and less nurturing you have to be as a teacher.

Stu thinks male teachers need to be seen as nurturing as well, “The role of a primary school teacher does not allow you to act in a hyper-aggressive way, and I think that’s a good thing.”

He adds, “During the nursery years, parents prioritise nurturing qualities over teaching qualities, and this might create a subconscious bias towards female teachers.”

Rightly or wrongly, there is a culture of suspicion around male school teachers in primary education, which could explain why so few men pursue a career as an early years teacher. Stu’s own experiences as a teaching assistant attest to this, “I’m aware that I have to be more careful when a child has hurt themselves or had an ‘accident’. I have a duty of care to the child but there are some occasions when I will call upon a female colleague to assist in certain situations because I feel I’m unable to.”

However, if we are going to strive for greater gender equality, then it’s important that men challenge these norms, and fulfil all the demanding aspects of a primary school teacher.

Jack Oliver-Blaney, 26, is a trainee social worker from Brighton. At the time of writing, men make up 18 per cent of the social care workforce in the UK. Jack’s work placement represented the overall picture, “the manager was a senior guy but every other member of the frontline team was female.”

As with nursing and teaching Jacks says, “men are more inclined to consider social work as a low-status job.”

Although, Jack believes the demands of the role itself might also be a contributing factor, “social work is emotional labour, it’s within our code of ethics to act in an anti-oppressive way.”

He adds, “I think it says something about masculinity in society that so few men are prepared to do that kind of work.”

However, there’s no reason why social work shouldn’t appeal to men

just as much as it does to women. A lot of men might assume social work is solely about companionship. Jack says “I think social work is quite rare because it’s inherently political in its DNA.”

He adds, “As a social worker, you want to dismantle systematic oppression by empowering vulnerable individuals in society to change for the better.”

The common denominator is men feel less inclined to become nurses, teachers or social workers because society has taught us to believe it is not their duty. Women should be no more obligated than men to fulfil these roles.

All three men profiled in this article described their work as a privilege and if boys are going to grow up to be the kind of adults we want in society, then we need more men to follow in their footsteps.

imbalance. Only 12 per cent of surgeons in the UK are women. More male nurses will hopefully pave the way for more female surgeons.

Lorenzo does believe that toxic masculinity might be at play, “a lot of guys will see the low pay and perceived low status of a nurse as a sacrifice rather than an opportunity. Until that mindset changes, things are likely to stay the same.”

The situation is similar in the education sector. Only 25 per cent of classroom teachers are male. Stu Hunter, 26 from Leicester, is about to start his career as an early years teacher (ages six and under) in a British international school in Luxembourg.

He says, “when you get into primary education, the gender imbalance becomes even more obvious. During my early years’ primary course I was one of three guys in a group of 28.” The stats back it up too, just three per cent of men make up the early years workforce in the UK.

As a society, we are slowly changing what it means to be a man. In order to continue moving forward, more male role models are needed for students in early years education.

Stu is more than happy to belt out nursery rhyme tunes or be the butt of the occasional classroom joke, he says, “My year four teacher inspired me to pursue a career in primary education. When I was her student, you could tell she genuinely cared about us.”

**“A lot of guys will see the low pay and perceived low status of a nurse as a sacrifice rather than an opportunity.”**

# MASKS AND MASCULINITY

In our latest photo series, we celebrate men from all over the world, who are proudly wearing their hygiene masks.



Cover star Kid Lit, Musical Artist, 24, New York, USA

Since the coronavirus pandemic, it has been almost universally recommended to wear a hygiene mask in public. However, President Donald Trump continues to contradict the advice of his own health experts by not wearing one. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson similarly went about his business without a mask before contracting the virus. Both leaders have overseen the two largest death tolls from Covid – 19 in their respective countries since the virus outbreak. Furthermore, Trump and Johnson have built their careers on alpha dominance, whether that be through their sexist views or their unwillingness to co-operate with others. A recent survey shows there is a widespread link between hygiene masks and emasculation. The survey, conducted by American and British researchers, found that men are less likely to wear hygiene masks because they believe it is a sign of weakness. It is not unreasonable

to suspect Trump and Johnson's refusal to wear hygiene masks is also linked to emasculation. The irony is, more men have died from Coronavirus than women, whether the cause of this is biological or environmental has yet to be clarified. Either way, wearing a mask helps to prevent the contraction of the virus. Therefore, toxic masculinity could be contributing to coronavirus related deaths across the world. In the UK, men are three times more likely to die from suicide than women. Many men don't seek the help they need in time, because they think doing so is a sign of weakness. Trump's refusal to wear a hygiene mask is another example of toxic masculinity rearing its ugly head. To counteract this, Attaboy has produced the photo series Masks and Masculinity, featuring men from all over the world, proudly wearing their hygiene masks, to help combat harmful stereotypes and potentially save people from a deadly virus, two very worthwhile causes.



Fahad Bin Haneefa, Business Student, 19, Kerala, India

“Wearing a mask in this COVID-19 situation can only make you stronger, and if that means looking weak in the eyes of the public then so be it. It is more important to be strong on the inside than the outside.”



Phillips Joseph, Student, 19, Karnataka, India

“As a man, I understand the pressures of masculinity and the impact it has on the way we look, but this virus doesn’t care what you look like.”



Snake, Fashion Designer, 28, Milan, Italy

“You are weaker without a mask in this current climate. Think of it as a fashion accessory if that helps.”

Dennis Rodman photographed at a book signing in New York on 21st August 1996.



# Should we celebrate **DENNIS RODMAN?**

Rodman is back in the limelight, but can we celebrate the former rebounder's legacy and acknowledge his flaws? Attaboy did some digging to find out.

By James Bayley

**T**hanks to the hit Netflix documentary *The Last Dance*, there is a wave of nostalgia for the 1990's Chicago Bulls, one of the most dominant teams in the history of basketball. At the centre of this is Dennis Rodman, the enigmatic power forward for the Bulls between 1995 – 1998. The series was watched by 23.8 million households during the first month of its release. Since then, the cult of Rodman's personality has re-entered popular culture. As a high profile athlete, he challenged the image of the hyper-masculine sportsman. He did so in a variety of ways; he frequented gay bars, covered his body in piercings and tattoos and once dyed a red AIDS ribbon in his hair for the 1995 playoffs. This was when the social stigma surrounding HIV was bigger than ever, especially in overtly-macho NBA locker rooms.

However, there is an irony in the media's sudden glorification of Rodman's stigma-shattering style. Articles like those recently featured in *Esquire* and *G.Q.*, fail to acknowledge the vitriolic abuse Rodman had to endure in response to his fashion choices in the '90s. For example, in 1996 the *Baltimore Sun* wrote, "Unlike the Material Girl, this much-tattooed, much-pierced, overdyed basketball star is style clueless, off the court or on, in drag or out."

Rodman has always seen himself as an essential figure to the gay community. In his 1996 autobiography *Bad As I Wanna Be* he said, "I think I've done more to reconfigure them than any other professional athlete."

During his playing days, Rodman was one of the biggest pioneers for LGBTQ+ athletes, despite not being gay himself. He tried to use his platform as a high profile sportsman to make the NBA's culture more open and accepting of gay athletes. To this day, the NBA still has no openly gay players, if that is to change then more players need to follow in Rodman's footsteps, the responsibility can't rest on the shoulders of gay players alone, to come out in a sport that still oppresses them.

Most major sports teams have a stranglehold on their key assets, 24 hours a day. Rodman was different though, as soon as he stepped off the court, he no longer represented his team, he was his own man. For example, in 1995 *Sports Illustrated* wrote, "Rodman doesn't give a flying halter top what the N.B.A. thinks of him."

Compare this to Rodman's teammate Michael Jordan. During a 1990 Senate race in Jordan's home state of North Carolina, Jordan refused to endorse Democrat Harvey Gantt, an African American. He was running against Republican Jesse Helms, a disreputable racist. Jordan simply said, "Republicans buy sneakers, too", to explain away his refusal to endorse Gantt. It's hard to imagine Rodman taking the same approach.

To promote his autobiography in 1996, Rodman attended a book signing wearing a custom made wedding dress. He did so, in order to marry himself and publicly proclaim his bisexuality. The outfit was gender-bending, but that had nothing to do with Rodman identifying as bisexual. This was a publicity stunt, one that propelled his book to number one in the *New York Times* bestseller list a week later.

In October 1993, while grieving a failed marriage and the loss of his beloved coach Chuck Daly, police found Rodman asleep in his car with a suicide note and a loaded rifle in a parking lot outside the Pistons' arena (the team he was playing for at the time). Instead of killing himself, Rodman wrote in his autobiography that he, "Killed the Dennis Rodman that had tried to conform to what everybody wanted him to be."

From this moment, Rodman's career transcended basketball, he became just as famous for his antics off

the court as he was for his prowess on it.

Rodman's individuality is something that should be celebrated, however, to glorify the law-defying Rodman could set a dangerous precedent. In this new wave of Rodman fandom, reports of his multiple arrests for domestic violence, including one incident in 2008 to which he pleaded guilty are nowhere to be seen. Unlike its list of gay players, the NBA's tally of players charged with domestic violence is aplenty. In this case, Rodman has done nothing to reconfigure the idea of the hyper-aggressive male athlete. His past transgressions should not be ignored, they should be used as an example to the NBA, to improve human decency within its ranks.

It's hard to celebrate Rodman the man, in light of his crimes. At the best of times, he is a breath of fresh air, an artist trapped in the body of an elite level athlete. In the worst of times, he is destructive and violent towards women.

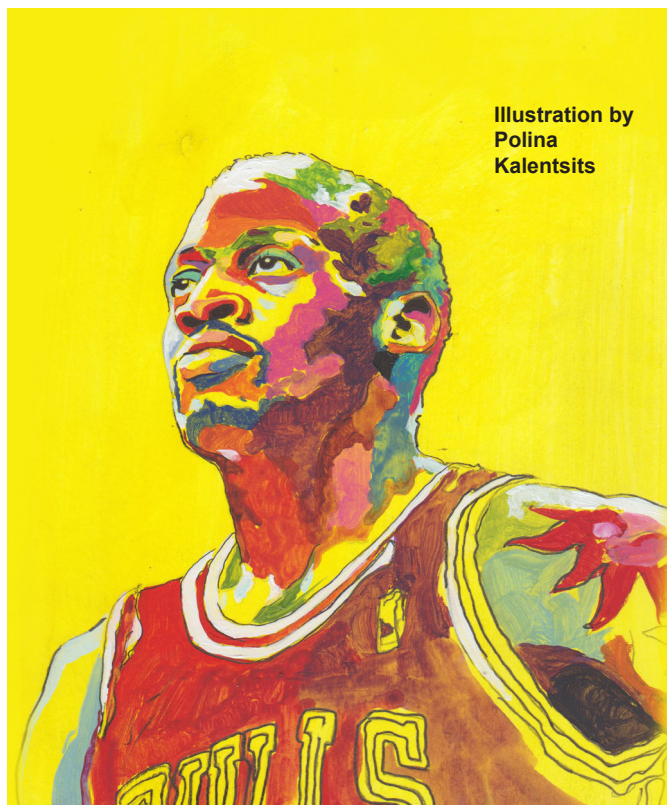
Should we celebrate a man like that?

Without Rodman, we might not have had Colin Kaepernick, Frank Ocean and Billy Porter to name a few. He paved the way for so many athletes and artists to express themselves beyond their industries, and to use their profile for the greater good.

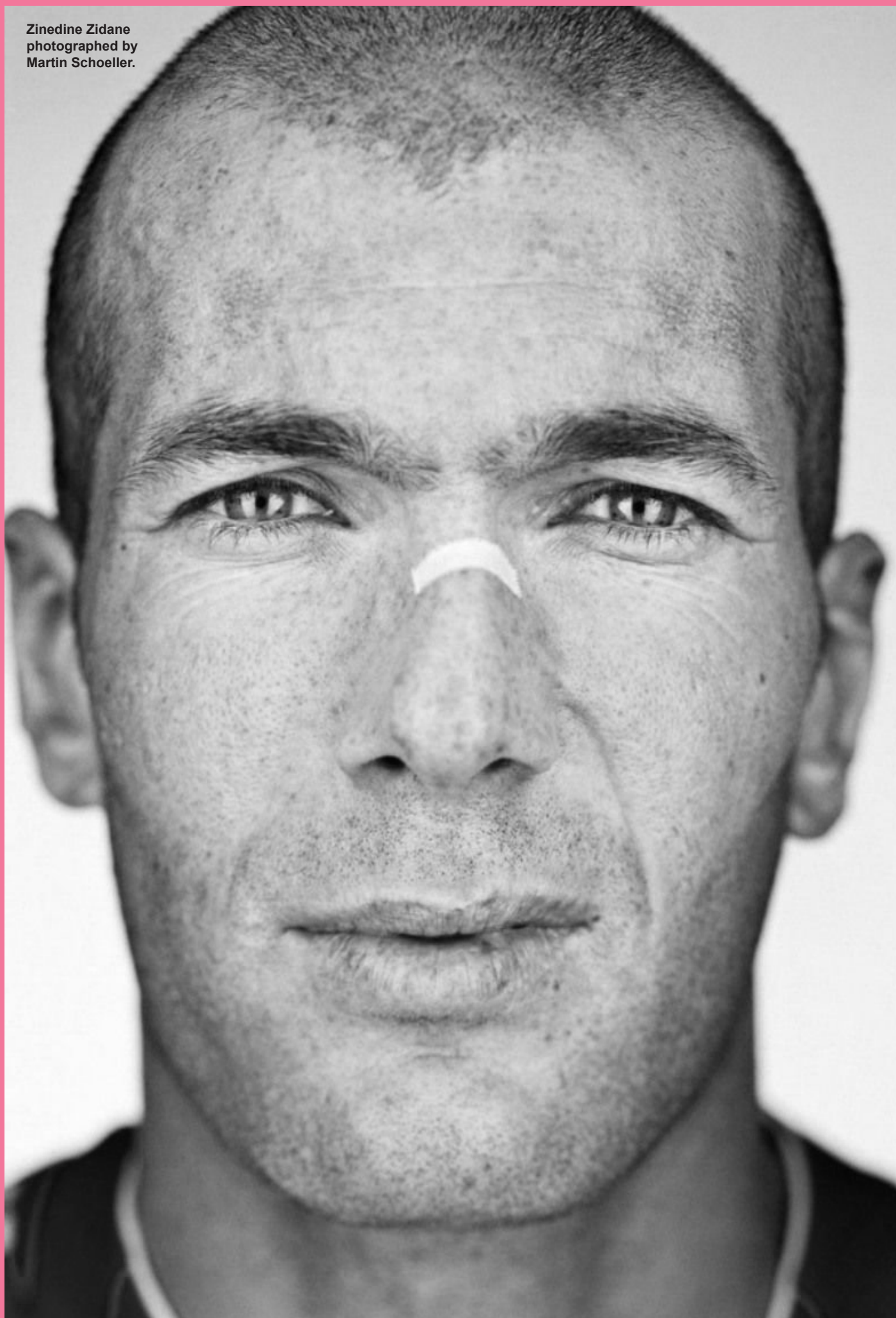
However, to give sports stars like Rodman a free pass for domestic violence undoes all the work he did to challenge toxic masculinity in popular sports. We should acknowledge Rodman for who he is, good and bad, to motivate real change in the NBA and beyond.

## "Rodman doesn't give a flying halter top what the N.B.A. thinks of him."

Illustration by  
Polina  
Kalentsits



Zinedine Zidane  
photographed by  
Martin Schoeller.





# ZINEDINE ZIDANE: race, grace and brutality

To mark his 47th birthday, we looked back on the legacy of Zinedine Zidane, a French footballer who united a divided nation with his sublime footballing talent in 1998.

By James Bayley

It is a testament to Zidane's career in professional football that his most infamous moment in the game is considered an, "ode to defeat" by Abel Abdessemed, who immortalised Zidane's 2006 World Cup final head-butt in his controversial statue, Coup de Tete.

The statue itself stands at an imposing 16ft and was displayed in Doha in Qatar, before it was removed due to its glorification of violence.

Zidane announced that the 2006 FIFA World Cup would be his final act as a professional player; France would have to win the tournament to ensure Zidane's denouement did not end in disappointment or defeat. Zidane carried his team all the way to the final, and he was justly awarded player of the tournament for his individual contribution.

The final itself took place in Berlin between France and Italy. Zidane's head-butt on fellow goal scorer Materazzi was his final act on a football pitch, an action he delivered with as much grace and panache as some of his finest goals.

Consequently, France lost the World Cup. Rather than criticise Zidane, the French press chose to celebrate Zidane's overall career. Jacques Chirac, the French President at the time, shared the sentiment of the media; "You are a virtuoso, a genius of football and an exceptional human being. That is why France admires you."

If geniuses were not flawed, they would not be geniuses in the first place. Zidane is regarded as a singular talent by many of the connoisseurs of football. In the same way, Mozart is considered to be a virtuoso by the influential voices in classical music, and like Mozart, Zidane's admirers want to uncover the truth regarding his journey to genius.

It is Zidane's mastery of the game that makes his flaws so intriguing. His weaknesses leave a vacuum, which allows for cultural and artistic interpretation. Zidane's story is particularly interesting due to the array of communities and cultures

that identify with him. Zidane is arguably the best-known Frenchman in the world; within France, he is the symbol of a multiethnic society, and his footballing talent has afforded him this privilege.

As researcher Jonathan Ervine writes after Zidane's World Cup triumph in 1998, "the French victory was used very widely as a metaphor for successful French integration." Zidane himself was an obvious individual example of positive integration because his father was an Algerian immigrant.

Since the beginning of the game itself, football has been manipulated by politics the world over, and France as a country relied on the achievements of Zidane and his teammates during their glory years.

Ervine adds, "This closes a chapter of French history because it shows one can remain faithful to an Algerian nationalist father and yet be for France, that one can be a Muslim and be fully French."

The bigger picture, however, involves Zidane to a much lesser extent. Professional players are bought and traded for primarily their footballing prowess and secondarily for their media clout. However, Zidane has illustrated the influence a

charismatic footballer can have in the real world, he was the foremost player in a global sport, a sport that has a larger following than any country or religion.

Zidane was, at times, over-emotional, and he thrived on the big occasions. In a sport that is overlaid with mundane media-trained bores, Zidane is the sole torchbearer of theatrical football, and his stage presence is sorely missed in today's game.

As an audience we were gripped, Zidane's career was never short of a

plot-twist or two, the last of which came right at the end of his story with the Frenchman's cathartic head-butt, a poetic finale to football's greatest work of art.

**"To be talked about is to be part of a story and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers – the media and their audience."**

**LEO BRAUDY**

# “My strength comes from my vulnerability and openness”

Life coach and friend of Attaboy, Yusef Sanei, talked us through his journey to mindfulness amidst a culture of toxic masculinity.

By James Bayley



I grew up watching Arnold Schwarzenegger movies, wanting to play basketball like Michael Jordan and fight like Bruce Lee. In my childhood eyes, being a man meant being strong, brave and tough. I was a naturally happy child but was also shy and gentle. As I went through primary school, mixing with other kids, this gentle nature was at times exploited, and I was left feeling scared and vulnerable.

Even at this young age, I was aware that showing emotions, crying, or even telling my mum, wasn't what boys did. So I pretended. I pretended that I was tough, that I was aggressive, that I was strong. It seemed like everyone else was doing this, so I fell in line. Our childhood games revolved around fighting each other, pretending to shoot each other, make fun of each other and certainly make fun of difference, or those that didn't conform to this more aggressive and dominant adolescent archetype.

Life was simply easier to navigate if you were aggressive. Secondary school was the next level of this drama. Older kids, higher stakes, bigger battles. It was a Darwinian place where in order to get through it you had to become callous and emotionally cold. The weaker ones didn't survive and endured what must have been a horrible six years.

My idols changed from slick movie stars to rappers and criminals. You forget that you were once gentle and innocent, by this point you have added too many layers of protection over yourself.

The thicker the barrier you create around yourself, the more you think it will protect you. But what you fail to realise is whilst it may provide you with some shielding, it suffocates you.

Our emotional capacity was limited to either anger or lust. These were the only two expressions that we allowed

each other to show. By my late teens, it seemed this well kept getting deeper. Myself and my company became darker and more lost. Petty criminals, drug addicts, violent and lost young men. School drop-outs getting high to escape the bleak reality that we had found ourselves in. Some of them went to jail, others stayed in the darkness. Luckily I got out.

One night, stoned, alone and depressed, it hit me. The thought that no matter how low I sank or how far I turned my back on my-self, there was still something inside me that wanted to feel happy.

This was the first time I ever observed a thought as being separate from myself and I started meditating. It changed everything.

Meditation is the practice of being with ourselves and accepting ourselves in the present moment. With practice, you can cultivate your awareness to no longer be subservient to the thinking mind but instead can remain present. It is in this present moment you can experience peace and quiet contentment. It is in this presence you become aware that your

past and identity are simply a collection of memories you choose to uphold. That your anxieties are simply a collection of memories you choose to uphold. That your anxieties are simply a collection of fantasies about a future that doesn't exist. In this present moment, you are free. Free to be who you are, not who you were 5 minutes ago or 5 years ago. But simply be.

My strength comes from my vulnerability and my openness, not from my ability to cover these up. A tree is stable because it allows its branches to be blown by the wind whilst its roots remain secure. A dead branch loses its flexibility and will be broken from the tree in the next storm.

These shells that we hide behind, these layers that we put over ourselves in order to protect us, are rigid and are weak. Our strength comes from our ability to be who we are and express ourselves freely. As men, by doing this, we give each other permission to do the same, in the hopes that the next generation of boys doesn't try and cover themselves but allows themselves to be open and free.

## Meditation tips for beginners:

- Sit comfortably, keeping your back and neck relatively straight (This doesn't need to be crossed-legged on the floor).
- Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose and out through your nose.
- Focus your awareness on your breath. Feel it entering the nasal passage, expanding the chest and belly, then watch it leave again.
- The mind will take you away, thoughts will take you away, bodily sensations will take you away, but each time this happens, just come back to focusing on your breath.
- Like a game, each time your thoughts take you away, just bring yourself back to the present moment.
- Practice this for 10 minutes a day.

To find out more about Yusef's journey and the benefits of meditation visit Mamopu.

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