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Point of View: In This Class on Feminism, Nobody Was on the Bench

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It was hard to overlook the fact that, of 19 students in Philosophy 215: Feminist Philosophies, at least six looked as well suited for tackling as for engaging in feminist philosophical debate. Walking into the classroom was like walking onto the set of a sitcom: football players sit uncomfortably in a room full of feminists. The potential for humor seemed rich.

I am neither a football player nor a coed. I graduated from Colby and stayed in Maine. I asked Professor Jill Gordon if I could audit the class because I missed school and I like Jill and I have a soft spot for philosophy. She kindly agreed. And, so, I found myself on a Thursday morning in February sitting next to a young, nervous woman from China, Maine.

Sweet first-year, I thought. Probably lives in Foss.

Everyone else in the room was equally easy to read. The young man with the T-shirt declaring “I Am the Categorical Imperative” had a future in classics or philosophy. The women with flawless skin and prim cardigans were typical women’s studies majors: smart, articulate upperclassmen having a fond yet disciplined affair with academia.

Then there were the six imposing young men with the same hairstyle and matching polo shirts. I could see the rest of the class wondering: “Why are those football players here?” By the time Professor Gordon came in, I had taken stock of our resident jocks and judged them harmless—enough.

Gordon’s first assignment was unusual but not particularly demanding. “Think about what rules of intellectual engagement you’d like this class to go by, and write them down.” I hastily jotted down some ideas right after class and ran off.

At the second session, the subsequent Tuesday, I assumed the women would easily monopolize the conversation. At first the glazed looks on the men’s faces seemed to confirm this. I settled into the heavy silence and waited. Then a voice from the athletic side of the table roused me from my stupor. He introduced himself as a math major from Connecticut and said, “I feel like there are a lot of different backgrounds, class years, and levels of experience with philosophy in general and with this subject in particular here.” Pausing to look around the room, he took a deep breath. “So I think we should try to keep our conversations as respectful and as engaging as possible, keeping in mind this mix of experiences and being open to different opinions.”
He was thoughtful and kind, even if his hat was on backwards. 

Eyebrows arched; some of us smiled. Another young man who outed himself as a first-year with a fondness for dead languages responded: “Yes. But we shouldn't let that curb our ability to be critical of others’ opinions and comments.”

A young woman with smart glasses and tight, curly brown hair suggested that we shouldn't take or make personal criticisms. “We need to be able to talk to each other without fearing that we will have our feelings hurt.”

And so it went. Over the next hour, people—some football players, some not—built on each other's suggestions. “We need to be able to talk to each other without fearing that we will have our feelings hurt.”

It only got better as the semester progressed. People quickly dropped pretenses and started speaking from personal experience—shedding their uniforms in the process.

Professor Gordon had reason to beam. We learned to expect and demand excellence. “I don't agree with you that a man may not completely understand the experience of being a woman,” the first-year from China said to me after a particularly heated discussion, “But I think you make a valid point that this author seems to suggest that.”

When I talk about PL215, people are perplexed that a third of the students in Feminist Philosophies were athletic white men. Ninety-nine percent say the same thing: “Really? Why?”

And I understand. We ask “why” because we like a good story and this seems to promise one. The high-minded care about increasing athlete participation in humanities courses, making classrooms more diverse, changing anti-intellectual stereotypes within certain athletic teams, challenging anti-athletic stereotypes among humanists.

But the rest of us are fishing for juicy details. Were some of these men trying to woo fellow classmates? Did they think that because Gordon is the academic liaison to the football team it was an easy “A,” only to be painfully (but deservedly) disappointed? Were they being punished by a disciplinarian coach, a mean academic advisor, a mischievous girlfriend?

I don’t know why these football players took PL 215, but I’m not too worried about it. In the end, what kept me going was that this group of people decided to drop stereotypes and engage feminism with curiosity and gumption. It takes courage to encounter diversity in unexpected places, even if you like to wear your baseball cap straight, and I came to deeply respect and cherish every person in that class.

The Adonises in our midst may have worn their allegiances on their sleeves, but none of us came free of baggage, assumptions, and expectations. No one asked us to wipe our slates clean, only to try to imagine what other slates might look like under the armor of our respective allegiances. That we succeeded buoyed my spirit and fed my imagination.

Rocío Orantes Carey graduated cum laude in philosophy and lives in central Maine. Professor Jill Gordon, chair of the Philosophy Department, has been the academic liaison to the football team for the past five years.