



ATLANTIC COAST CONFERENCE ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS OF COACH & ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT IN THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL & SOCIAL JUSTICE

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[Video Results](#)

This study surveyed Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) athletes' perceptions of coach and administrative support during their calls for social and racial justice reform in the wake of George Floyd's murder. In their advocacy/activism efforts, athletes mostly attended protests and marches, posted on social media, and had conversations with teammates and coaches about racism and racial injustices. Overall, most athletes surveyed noted that administrators and coaches supported their efforts by encouraging them to engage in advocacy/activism, providing educational resources, creating a respectful program or team environment, and offering verbal encouragement. However, some athletes felt like their athletic department leadership did not do enough to bolster their advocacy/activism or did not know of any support offered by administrators or coaches. There were no differences of perceived support based on athlete race. Finally, athletes expressed a desire for their leadership to continue to show direct support for athlete advocacy/activism for racial and social justice to ensure that George Floyd's murder and subsequent athlete action are not in vain.

Background

Traditionally, college athletes have not had the ability to speak out against injustices affecting their lives, often due to the power dynamics present in intercollegiate sport (Benedict & Keteyian, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2015). This dynamic changed in 2020 after murders of people of color, particularly the murder of George Floyd (Hill et al., 2020). College athletes spoke out and engaged in advocacy/activism related to social and racial justice.

Social justice is the capacity to organize efforts with others to create benefits for an entire community (Novak, 2009), and one avenue for social justice efforts is through athletics. Similarly, racial justice issues are becoming increasingly centered in college sport studies. Research demonstrates that college sport leaders are predominantly white and male (Lapchick, 2020; NCAA demographic database, n.d.). Additionally, most athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) identify as white, except in the revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball, where athletes are predominantly Black (NCAA demographic database, n.d.). Race in sports plays a pivotal role in the experiences of college athletes, particularly when it comes to stereotyping and stereotype threat (Comeaux, 2018; Stone et al., 2012). Importantly, athletics may reinforce dominant narratives, like oppression and injustice, and as a result, athletes who experience the impact of these societal reinforcements may strive to use social justice reforms to achieve equality in their own spheres of influence (Frey & Eitzen, 1991).

Findings

Nine ACC institutions participated in the study, eight of which were public schools. Through stratified random sampling, 25% of each team was selected. Sports included in this study were limited to those with broad-based participation, thus athletes in 19 of the ACC's sponsored sports were eligible for participation. One hundred athletes completed the survey, yielding a response rate of roughly 10%, and all 19 sports were represented by at least one athlete. Importantly, not all athletes answered all survey questions.

Most respondents came from women's track/field ($n = 18$, 16%), followed by men's track/field ($n = 10$, 9%), women's cross country ($n = 10$, 9%), and softball ($n = 10$, 9%). The fewest respondents



came from women's golf ($n = 2, 2\%$), men's basketball ($n = 2, 2\%$), men's tennis ($n = 1, 1\%$), and men's golf ($n = 1, 1\%$). Female athletes were overrepresented in this sample with almost 2/3 of the responses ($n = 65, 65\%$). Male athletes ($n = 34, 34\%$) and one athlete who preferred self-described completed the remaining surveys. Finally, 6% ($n = 6$) of athletes identified as Hispanic/Latinx, while 16% ($n = 16$) selected Black/African American. Twenty-seven respondents did not provide their racial/ethnic identity and the majority of athletes identified as white ($n = 46, 46\%$). The remaining five athletes selected American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, or preferred to specify.

All 100 athletes surveyed were aware of George Floyd's murder, and 73 reflected on their emotions after this incident. The most prominent emotion was anger ($n = 23, 32\%$), followed by feeling sad ($n = 20, 27\%$), wanting change and justice ($n = 17, 23\%$), being upset or distraught ($n = 14, 19\%$), feeling numb and tired ($n = 14, 19\%$), and expressing shock ($n = 10, 14\%$). Still, many felt called to action as a result of George Floyd's murder and 58 athletes stated they participated in advocacy/activism as a means to promote change. Some of the most prominent advocacy/activism avenues included attending or hosting peaceful protests ($n = 31, 66\%$), posting on social media ($n = 23, 49\%$), having conversations about race and racism ($n = 20, 43\%$), and educating themselves further about such social issues ($n = 10, 21\%$). Additionally, of the athletes who engaged in activism and/or advocacy, 40% ($n = 23$) were athletes of color.

Next, athletes were asked to discuss their observations of athletics department administrators' and head coaches' engagement in advocacy/activism to promote social and/or racial justice. Athletes stated that administrators predominantly hosted discussions, meetings, or summits to facilitate communication about the importance of social and/or racial justice ($n = 15, 32\%$). Athletes had similar perceptions about their coaches' responses with most athletes saying that their coach hosted discussions and team meetings to talk about racism, white privilege, and social inequality ($n = 25, 53\%$).

Finally, when asked about the ways in which athletic administrators supported them in their efforts for social and/or racial justice, athletes most commonly stated that the department allowed them to engage in advocacy and activism without silencing their voices ($n = 10, 23\%$). Others found that administrators assisted their justice-oriented endeavors through educational resources ($n = 7, 16\%$), verbal support ($n = 7, 16\%$), physical support such as attending protests ($n = 6, 14\%$), and establishing a safe, respectful environment ($n = 4, 9\%$). Regarding coach support, a little over ¼ of the respondents said their coaches provided verbal support ($n = 12, 28\%$), followed by coaches allowing athletes to engage in advocacy/activism ($n = 8, 19\%$), cultivating a safe and respectful environment ($n = 8, 19\%$), and providing educational information and resources ($n = 4, 9\%$). Still, 21% ($n = 9$) of the athletes in the sample said that their coaches did "nothing" to support their social/racial justice work. Overall, athletes perceived more support from administrators than coaches.

Implications

There are important implications for athletics administrators and coaches stemming from these results. Athlete responses provide a listening opportunity for administrators and coaches to value the experiences of athletes, particularly athletes of color, who are striving to achieve social/racial justice. These emotions and perceptions offer powerful building blocks for future discussions and seminars about racism in athletics. Knowing about the experiences of ACC athletes, coaches, administrators, and athletes can collaborate to create more equity-centric approaches in athletics, shifting the power dynamics so that athletes, especially athletes of color, become partners with actors who have traditionally exercised power over them



(Cooper et al., 2020; Raphael & Abercrombie, 2017). Such work can be done or continued through diversity and racial/social justice programming. Additionally, the athletes in this study noted that they saw administrators and coaches engage the most with racial and social justice causes through meetings and discussions. Many also expressed hope that such conversations would continue in the future. Providing such programming extends the work practitioners are already doing, while demonstrating support for athletes who want to continue to learn about race and racism in sport and ways to combat it. Previous literature notes that discussions/summits offer strong educational avenues for athletes across various backgrounds to engage with and learn from one another.

Knowing the ways in which ACC athletes commit to social/racial justice allows practitioners to better support these endeavors. With athletes protesting, posting on social media, and engaging in conversations about racism, leaders can offer additional platforms for athletes to engage in or organize. By knowing how important protesting is for athletes in this sample, an athletic department could arrange an annual march to allow athletes to continue to showcase this symbolic activism. Media and marketing departments could do a social activism “blitz” on social media encouraging athletes to post about social justice on their social media accounts. This “blitz” could also use team accounts or social media platforms for the athletic department or institution as a whole. Additionally, an athletic department could arrange for a social and/or racial justice night at various sporting events to highlight sports-based activism (Cooper et al., 2019). Athletes could use messages on their uniforms or arm bands that are important to them and announcements about racial equality could be broadcast throughout the games. Finally, attendees could be encouraged to donate to a social justice cause during the event, fostering more economic activism on the part of the athletics programs and fans.

The athletes in this study demonstrated high levels of social consciousness (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010) and expressed that anti-racist leadership needs to come from the top and not just from athletes. Thus, the proposed actions above, and others, can demonstrate an acknowledgement of systemic issues in sports, while showing athletes that the leadership cares about what is important to them. This can assist in improving the experiences of athletes, particularly athletes of color. A final recommendation of this research is for leadership to demonstrate increased or continued allyship with college athletes. Coombs et al. (2019) contend that it is particularly crucial for white athletics administrators to find ways to be allies for athletes of color. Considering historical structures of American society, it has been noted that, oftentimes, white people in positions of power and high levels of visibility, receive more credibility and attention when discussing societal issues (Bryant, 2018; Coombs et al., 2019). Thus, if white administrators and head coaches actively demonstrate support for their athletes, issues of systemic racism may receive increased attention and result in more meaningful change. Many athletes of color in this study were conscious of the credibility given to white leaders and argued that change needs to come from the top.

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