



CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

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The Center for Research in Intercollegiate Athletics Releases

Looking into The Stands: An analysis of the relationship between the white fan and black athlete

This research investigated the ways in which a racially homogenous fan base impacts the black student-athlete experience. Race is understood to be an arbitrarily and socially constructed phenomena, regardless of its political and social effects (Omi & Winant, 1994). Racism is systemic, racism is alive, and the sporting environment is not exempt from its pervasiveness. This research gave black athletes (n = 5) a platform to speak candidly within confidential interviews about how their intercollegiate experience has been influenced by the disproportionate racial representation between player and fan.

Research Questions and Related Themes

1) How do interactions with fans impact the overall student-athlete experience?

- Athletes expressed how their interactions with fans can adversely affect their sense of *belonging* and how they choose to *identify* on their respective campuses. Many referenced the need to *sacrifice parts of themselves* in order to appease white consumers and to fit in with the majority.

2) In what ways does race affect or influence player and fan interaction?

- Athletes shared that they believe their race is an inevitable factor in many of their interactions with fans. They spoke about how the color of their skin encourages white consumers to view them as *more threatening* and *less educated* than their white teammates.

3) What actions can the university take?

- All the athletes felt that more programs and resources should be extended by administration at both the campus and NCAA level to cater specifically to black athletes. One participant shared his dissatisfaction with the resources offered to black athletes in relation to the plethora symposiums and seminars offered by the NCAA and other organizations who work closely within intercollegiate athletics.

Literary Breakdown

History of Black and White Participation in Sport

Before achieving a deeper understanding of the relationship between the white fan and the black athlete it is necessary to revisit the history of the white athlete's dominion in sport. Participation in sports has been, and continues to be, a pastime and leisure activity for white people, where they are either playing or consuming sports in a voluntary and light-hearted manner (Hylton, 2005). The same cannot be said for the countless black bodies that were required to participate in physical activity, or 'sport', for the purposes of entertaining their white superiors.



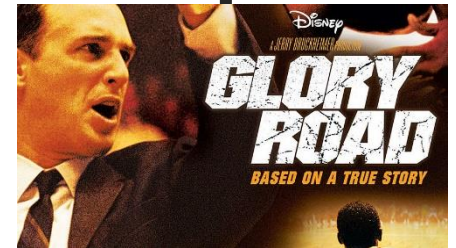
Threat Management and the Policing of the Black Athlete

It's important to note that this kind of policing of athletes does not happen in just any sport nor does it happen to just any athlete; celebratory laps around the soccer field immediately after a scored goal are expected and accepted, however, similar behavior in the NFL or NBA would never be tolerated (Simons, 2003). While the black man is praised for his innate and physical prowess, he is also combatted with fear due to an assumption that his physical superiority will allow him to pose as an unconquerable threat to his white peers (Andrews, 1996). The black player/white spectator dichotomy is a strategic method used to mitigate white fear, aka "threat management" (Hughes, 2004).



The White Savior Motif

The white savior motif is a recurring theme that posits a white person (e.g. individual, organization, owner) fulfills their noble duty by saving a black person from threatening or dire situations, propelling them in a way the black person was simply incapable of doing without their intervention (Schultz, 2014).



Player Protest and Activism

In the NFL, 70% of the players are black while 83% of fans are white. The controversy over player protests stems from white fans that were not happy about black players using their platform in the NFL to push the Black Lives Matter agenda, which was reflected in the immediate decline in both viewership and attendance (Bates, 2017).



Access

The progressing commercialization of sporting events, paired with increased admission costs, suggests that the sporting industry is tailoring its activity to more affluent and 'civilized' attendees (Cleland & Cashmore, 2013). Black attendance at sporting events outside of basketball and football is virtually non-existent and as leagues continue to adopt pay-per-view and subscription options, black viewership is on a steady decline (Edwards, 2000). Although it's important to avoid the conflation of race and class, the causal relationship between the two is undeniable; previous research confirms that one's race, in terms of stratification, oftentimes determines their socioeconomic status (US Census Bureau, 2009).



Methodology

All findings were acquired by way of semi-structured interview between the researcher and the athlete. This methodological approach created a space where the athletes felt comfortable speaking about some of their more disheartening and disturbing experiences; athletes also were given the opportunity to provide suggestions for how the existing system can better cater to its black athletes.

Explanatory research was used to assess the causal relationship between hegemonic white fandom and the experiences of black athletes. All participants were required to satisfy the two following criteria: 1) must be a black male athlete who still has athletic eligibility or just recently exhausted their eligibility within the last 5 years, and 2) must compete, or have competed, on a men's basketball team in a Power 5 conference (Agyemang et. al, 2010). This study focuses only basketball players due to their heightened visibility under white surveillance and their susceptibility to exploitation.

There was one athlete from each of the Power 5 conferences represented in the study. Some of the participants were still current athletes, while others had just recently exhausted their eligibility before continuing their basketball careers professionally. The participants were all black males who offered a richness in diversity as it related to their age, size, position, talent level, financial status, and familial background.

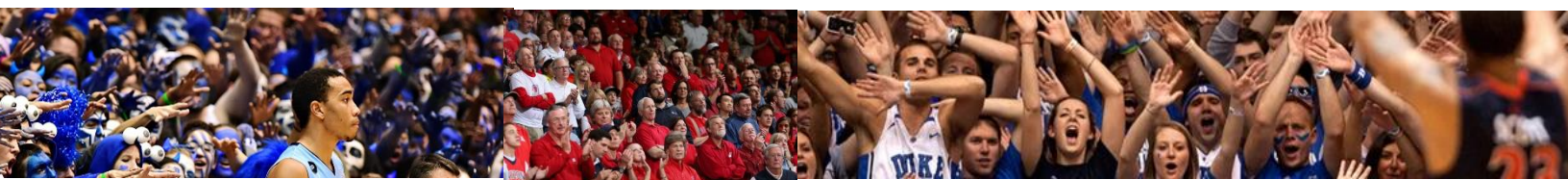
Findings

RACE RELATIONS: Although the discrepancy in racial representation between fans and athletes in Division 1 men's basketball is an obvious reality, personal accounts shared by the athletes worsened this reality. This portion of the interview focused on how race affects player and fan interaction, all responses will be in reference to Research Question 2 and its associated themes: threat management, representation, patriarchal benevolence, and the White Savior complex. Participants found themselves on the receiving end of undeserved and racist forms of harassment during their time competing collegiately. One athlete shared the anecdote below when speaking about his experience at an away game:

We played at --- I didn't tell the media this after the game but I did tell them there was a vulgar comment. I'm on the bench and we're starting to come back into the game. I stand up to go cheer and a fan tells me "Sit down nigger, sit down" so I go in and hit the game winner. Game time. But you deal with that throughout the whole process and you know, it's amazing to think as an athlete they want us to speak out to be public figures, but we are so limited depending on who we are.

Racism deceives in ways where it becomes easy to consider it a thing of the past. Using white habitus as a theoretical framework requires racism to be understood as both an intentional and unintentional practice, something that can happen both consciously and subconsciously. Although some athletes shared stories where they were overtly and undeniably discriminated against, most of their experiences dealt with covert forms of racism

FAN INTERACTIONS: Participants were first asked, very broadly, to describe their playing environment before college compared to their playing environment while competing on the collegiate level. This question was posed in reference to Research Question 1, with representation, support, comfortability, access being the themes of focus. It was intended to encourage participants to begin thinking about fan interactions not just from a general sense, but also how those interactions have varied over time based on location, talent pool, and access level. Many of the athletes described their first real introduction to playing on the collegiate level as 'culture shock'. One participant said the following when asked to speak



about how his high school fan base differed from college-- he shares testimony from both his experience and that of his older brother who played football, another highly visible sport, also at the Power 5 level:

You go to a lot of prestigious schools that are majority white populations and the support, the fans are majority white and most times it's a culture shock. I know for me; I honestly say I had never been around that many white people in my life, so it was a culture shock. My brother played in the NFL for 8 years. He went to [power 5 school] so that's a school with a lot more white people than there is at [SCHOOL]. So you know it was a culture shock for him when we're coming from North Chicago and he's going to [power 5 school] and he's got to learn to talk a certain way or carry himself a certain way, so you don't want to make people uncomfortable. Cause you're an athlete, you can't show some sort of resistance. You have to show some sort of submitting to the perception of you being a threat so it's very tough at times. And it's interesting seeing the difference between conferences, the different cultures, the different types of environments, the support systems are very different.

Intercollegiate athletics, as a space, often denies or minimizes that existence of racial tension. Many of the microaggressions displayed from white sport administrator to a white fan are overlooked or ignored because they have become a normalized part of the process. Every participant in the study first mentioned their donors when asked to speak about their fanbase, words like "white", "old", "man" were used in almost all the interviews. This provided a perfect example of how the racial disproportionality between black player and white fan has been normalized to where athletes only envision one kind of fan. Another theme that resurfaced throughout the interviews was threat management, also known as fear mitigation. The black male, who was ordinarily considered aggressive and dangerous, became respected and supported once in uniform.

Suggestions and Future Research

The goal of this research was to enhance the student athlete experience; in order to achieve this, it was important to give the athletes a voice to offer suggestions for how the system can be improved. The interview ended with conversation in reference to Research Question 3 and its themes: resources, programs, responsibility. Before opening for suggestions, athletes were first asked to speak about any programs, or resources currently being offered to black student-athletes on their campus to make them feel supported or comfortable in their playing environment. None of their universities offered such programs. When one of the athletes was asked if he felt that those programs were necessary, he responded:

You don't have no whites on your team for real, so I feel like we making you look good, we are winning these games for y'all, you not out here. I feel like we deserve more than what we get, y'all could do more.

When asked who should be responsible for implementing these programs, one participant suggested the responsibility falls largely on the NCAA to make their athletes feel consistently supported throughout their time competing collegiately. He mentioned that the NCAA, and many of its member conference, symposium, programming etc. to ensure minorities and international athletes feel some togetherness and community... everyone doesn't go through the same things and everyone doesn't have the same perspectives.

Participants shared frustration with the current system; they had no choice but to be reminded of their race throughout their collegiate experience. There is work to be done; the question is where do we begin? While the racial makeup of fanbase unlikely to change into something more representative of the teams they support, there are a variety of options to be considered by both individual universities and the NCAA to determine how they can provide their black athletes with more support, comfort, and community. A few options include reevaluating the number of tickets athletes are allotted each game in an effort to get more of their family and friends in the stands. Additionally, we suggest addressing the



issue directly through an annual conference or symposium that focuses on bettering the experiences of black athletes while also preparing them for greater career or networking opportunities post-departure from the university. Something *must* be done and the time is now.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Comparative analysis of the experiences of black athletes at predominantly white institutions (PWI) v. black athletes at historically black colleges or universities (HBCU). This study would allow the researcher to more accurately assess the effects of a fan base whose racial diversity is in alignment with the athletes.
- Comparative analysis of the experiences of black athletes at PWIs v. white athletes at PWIs. Again, this study would juxtapose the experiences of black athletes and white athletes but now in the same environments, meaning the effects of their racial identity would be made clear.
- Expand to include the experiences of female athletes, with a focus on the dually marginalized black, female athlete. Understanding the intersectionality of the black, female athlete and how her race, sexuality, and gender work in tandem to influence the experience will further enrich the discourse.

About CRIA

The Center for Research in Intercollegiate Athletics (CRIA) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill facilitates data-driven decision-making in intercollegiate athletics

The CRIA Advisory Board includes more than 20 leaders in the intercollegiate athletics industry, including university Presidents, Athletic Directors, and Conference Commissioners

For more information visit www.cria-unc.com

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