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# Books or Baskets: Compromising the Education and Future of Black Student-Athletes

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# Books or Baskets: Compromising the Education and Future of Black Student-Athletes

## **Abstract**

In this paper, I discuss the challenges and inequalities that Black male athletes face while playing college sports, particularly basketball and football at PWIs. I explore how this focus on sports pushes these individuals to focus on athletics rather than academics, as they are there on scholarships and are focused primarily on representing their schools and becoming professional athletes. I discuss multiple factors that play into these student-athletes' idea that athletics are more important than academics. Using multiple studies, I give information and statistics on the outcomes of these athletes. I also provide limitations of the studies I use so that others can expand the information given and contribute to this topic in the future.

## **Keywords**

Education, Black athletes, PWIs, exploitation, inequality

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Higher Education | Sports Studies

## **Comments**

Written as a research paper for Africana Studies 250: Black Bodies in American Sport.

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## **Books or Baskets**

### **Compromising the Education and Future of Black Student-Athletes**

The system of recruitment in the NCAA supports the advancement of African American male athletes on the court and within their sport, but not within the classroom. For these Black male athletes, academics comes second in priority to what they can accomplish in their sport to benefit their college and its ranking/success in the NCAA. These athletes receive preferential treatment through the recruitment process and often attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), which want them to be part of a sports team to help the school achieve success and gain publicity. But this often undermines the quality of the education these student-athletes receive. The environment that has been created is problematic for these young athletes whose education is compromised, leaving them with nothing to fall back on if they are unable to pursue or are not offered a professional career. The message being conveyed is that our society sees no issue in commodifying these young men if it can benefit a collegiate sports program, which provides revenue and positive publicity for the university and entertainment for the general population. Several articles and studies have looked at the academic inequities for Black male athletes and the structure of the athletic and academic environment within which these student athletes spend their college career. By looking at the success (specifically graduation rates) of Black athletes in the NCAA (especially basketball and football); pressure from their families and neighborhoods; the lack of emphasis that is placed on academics while they are undergraduate students; and, the financial outcomes of many pro level athletes, I will explain how Black male athletes have been pushed to prioritize athletics and the potential for a professional

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career over the opportunity to secure a college education, and what harmful effects this can have on their future.

In building my argument, I will start by giving some statistics regarding graduation and retention rates for Black male athletes and the NCAA in general. Next, I will talk about the pressures from family and friends that is put on these players at a very young age. I will continue by talking about how this focus on athletics is further emphasized at the PWIs that these Black male athletes attend. I will then look at what happens to these athletes in the future as a result of a singular focus on sports rather than balancing athletics and academics to ensure that they receive an education. This includes why many athletes choose to play ball overseas and how an absence of formal education can impact these athletes who go pro and don't have the tools to manage their new-found wealth. Finally, I will offer some solutions to this societal issue and pose some limitations to the available data.

In developing the case for how Black male athletes are being compromised, it is beneficial to start by looking at some statistics about Black male athletes at Predominately White Institutions and in the NCAA. According to one study done in 2013 by Harper, Williams and Blackman, Black male athletes comprised only 2.8% of undergraduate students, but on football teams, made up 57.1% of players and on basketball teams made up 64.3% of players (as cited in Meekins, 2017, p.2). It was reported in 2013 by Van Rheenan "that the college sports of basketball and football generated \$6 billion in annual revenue" (as cited in Meekins, 2017, p.48). Clearly, the NCAA is an extremely successful business that is benefitting from the talent of these athletes, yet none of that money is being reinvested to help athletes succeed off the

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court and off the field. In fact, “NCAA member school sports revenues have increased 8000% since 1976” (Murty, Roebuck, & McCamey, 2014, p.3). Unfortunately, the financial success seen at the institution level doesn’t translate to the classroom for Black male athletes. Graduation rates for Division I football and basketball teams who made it to the bowl or tournament level showed, according to Lapchick (2011), “Black male college student-athletes with 20% and 32% lower graduation rates, respectively, than their white counterparts” (as cited in Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012, p.108).

The NCAA and Predominantly White Institutions can’t be held solely responsible for the exploitation experienced by these athletes. The foundation was set far earlier in the lives of these Black men, many of which have come from poor families that struggled to make ends meet and provide for their children--especially in the area of education. In 2006, Harrison, Comeaux and Plecha discovered that “Blacks were recruited from less prestigious high schools with insufficient resources, which likely underprepared them for the rigors of college-level academic work” (as cited in Harper, 2018, p.4). Schools are publically funded in these low status neighborhoods, meaning that the quality of education is generally lower than the schools that White students attend. This structural challenge is reinforced by the lack of education opportunities available to these Black male athletes, which leaves them ill-prepared for a life beyond their home town. As a result of the low socioeconomic status of these families:

the gifted black athlete is a success symbol in poor black communities, where many, if not most, grow up; and he is frequently pushed into football and basketball sports as a high school youth by his parents, friends, coaches, and associates who think that success in these sports will provide a free and easy

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access to college, and later the pros where he can get rich (Murty, Roebuck, & McCamey, 2014, p.4).

Another issue which stems from early childhood pressures is that the Black male athletes who do envision getting an education in their future and actually want to focus on academics, are not supported and may be forced by other individuals in their lives to focus on sports (Murty, Roebuck, & McCamey, 2014, p.5). The idea that education is second to athletics is part of the culture for these young men and many Black male athletes have shared that they have often felt the need to “mask their intelligence for fear of being ridiculed by others” (Scott, Taylor, & Palmer, 2013, p. 294). From an extremely early age, whether these athletes have a vision that involves an education or not, others who are influential in their lives tell them that pursuing an academic path won't get them anywhere. They believe that the Black male athletes' place is on the courts or the fields. When it comes time for college, athletes will go where they see themselves being a successful athlete, not a successful student, since they are ultimately focused on their future career as a pro athlete. Since these Black male athletes come from areas of poverty, their athletic skill is seen as a chance to make much needed money for their families. Because athletics is an industry with huge salary potential, athletes often become breadwinners for their families--they are the ones who have the greatest chance of breaking the bubble of poverty that surrounds their family.

In addition to pressure from their families, friends, neighborhoods and economic conditions, another significant factor impacting the future for these athletes comes from the colleges and universities they attend and from the NCAA itself. The NCAA says that academic success “is the ability to maintain eligibility” (as cited in Carter-Francique,

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Hart, & Cheeks, 2015, p.158). All that is required of athletes is that they “exhibit academic progress through completing a certain percentage of their academic courses” (as cited in Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015, p.158). In addition to a lack of focus on academics by the NCAA, the stereotypes of Black male athletes are constantly being ingrained into the athletes’ minds by other students and faculty at the PWIs, which contributes to them doing poorly and not putting as much effort into academics (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012, p.109). As a result, as Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper said in 2011, Black male athletes constantly “self-stereotype themselves as a *dumb jock* and thus develop a perilously heightened sense of athletic identity” (as cited in Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012, p.110). In a study done to analyze how Black male athletes are treated on campus, one participant said that a “White athlete comes to school to get a great education and hopefully be a good football player. The Black athletes...are taught to come to be a great football player and go to class because that’s what keeps you eligible” (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012, p. 120-121). Furthering the problem is the fact that, as we learn from an article by Fish (2003):

the best compensated person on any Division I campus is all but guaranteed to be either the football or men’s basketball coach. Though college coaches are fond of calling themselves ‘educators’ their compensation is not on par with educators who are in charge of the medical school or business school. College coaching salaries are more in line with entertainer (as cited in Wilson, Schrage, Burke, Hawkins, & Gauntt, 2011, p. 398).

Most coaches are compensated based on the team’s athletic performance rather than academic performance, which makes them more focused on the success of the team

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over the academic success of the individual athlete--it is the student that pays the price while the coaches profit.

On the surface, playing sports at the university level seems to be an ideal scenario. A recruited athlete receives many perks for signing on to play sports including financial assistance, private athletic facilities, different (better) food, free sportswear and more. These perks often overshadow the fact that student-athletes are missing out on an education and having different academic and social experiences compared to their peers. This is even more so for Black male athletes than for their White counterparts (Benson, 2000). It is not surprising that, "frequently student athletes are guided by some student-athlete academic advisors and by some coaches into Mickey Mouse courses, courses taught by 'sports-friendly' professors; courses in independent studies; courses requiring little homework" (Murty, Roebuck, & McCamey, 2014, p.6-7). In addition, "many schools also offer remedial courses and special tutoring services whereby term papers, take home examinations, and other coursework papers are prepared for student athletes" (Murty, Roebuck, & McCamey, 2014, p.7).

The environment that is created for these Black male athletes perpetuates not only an unequal academic experience but also effects the emotional wellbeing of these men who "arrive on campus having to deal with others' perceptions of them and the myths and stereotypes associated with them" (Person & LeNoir, 1997, p.82). These Black athletes at PWIs feel marginalized and may experience racist situations, which have a negative effect on their self-esteem and confidence. As Dealy (1990) says, these athletes often "do not feel entirely welcome on campus, but instead as if their only purpose is to win football and basketball games" (as cited in Person & LeNoir, 1997,



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p.82). Furthermore, as one article says, “many black student athletes recruited to play on white campuses as reported to us feel lonely, unwelcome, isolated, and socially discriminated against” (Murty, Roebuck, & McCamey, 2014, p.8). According to one student, “No one says oh he must be here for business school. No, they say ‘that black dude plays a sport.’ I know most folk think we are just here to play ball” (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012, p.117).

Playing sports at a Division I institution does not guarantee that an athlete will be drafted into the NBA or NFL. Due to the large amount of competition and low chance of ending up in the pro leagues in the U.S., many athletes choose to pursue sports careers overseas. It has been consistently shown that the NFL and NBA “have drafted fewer than 2% of student-athletes” (Meekins, 2017, p. 3). Pursuing a career overseas is not necessarily desirable and the quality of life for the athletes is anything but glamorous. However, athletes choose to play in a foreign country because they need the money and they think they will potentially be drafted to the NFL or NBA after playing abroad. In many cases, athletes will choose to not even attend college, but to go directly into playing overseas. While abroad, athletes are dealing with a new culture, which can cause lots of stress and discomfort in being far from home (Meisterjahn, 2011, p. 20). In addition, while overseas, as Maguire and Pearton (2000) mention, many players will switch between multiple teams within a season (as cited in Meisterjahn, 2011, p. 26). This constant change in geographic location of the athlete’s team can lead to social stressors from having to make new friends and integrate with new people, making it tough to maintain relationships (Meisterjahn, 2011, p. 27). The athletes who choose to go overseas will also face barriers of language and culture that lead to more stress

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(Meisterjahn, 2011, p. 29). These athletes often feel as though they are on the outskirts, which can make everyday interactions and decisions difficult. It is clear that while playing overseas may seem like a good option to jump start a career, the salaries are not as high as in the U.S and there are often large unintended consequences that result from this decision.

For athletes that don't go overseas, we need to consider what happens to them after they finish college or if they don't make it to graduation. Many Black male athletes exercise the option to enter the draft as early as after their freshman year of college. Others choose to enter the draft after four years of college but both groups face the same issues—neither have been properly educated. They have either been in school too short a time to have gained a degree, or, they have spent four years taking an artificial schedule and not learning any real skills to transfer into a professional or social environment outside of sports. There are many repercussions that are not thought about before these athletes take action. Unfortunately, as Sports Illustrated (2009) has shared, “by the time they have been retired for two years, 78% of former NFL players have gone bankrupt or are under financial stress” (as cited in Corben, 2012) and “within five years of retirement, an estimated 60% of former NBA players are broke” (as cited in Corben, 2012). This is largely due to the fact that they haven't received proper guidance and lessons on how to handle money. How are these athletes supposed to know financial literacy if they have never taken a real class or often haven't even completed two years of college?

In addition, when considering their lack of financial knowledge, these athletes are frequently taken advantage of in business deals, since they don't know the proper way

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to invest their money, and they have not been taught what is and isn't a good business deal (Corben, 2012). Furthermore, the career of professional athlete is relatively short, since athletics takes an extremely strenuous toll on the body. After completing their sports careers, Black male athletes are still relatively young and often uneducated and have nowhere to go and nothing to fall back on, since they don't have a proper education or diploma. Moreover, if an athlete gets injured, their career can either get cut short or never happen at all. In this case, they have no degree, no job, and are left in the same position they started in when they were younger. Once these athletes are finished playing in the pros, or when they fail to be drafted to a team because of an injury or lack of skill, they may face an existential crisis on top of their existing financial and job stress. Up to that point, an athlete's life has revolved around sports. When this is no longer the case, and not an option, these athletes are faced with the need to reinvent themselves. When they can no longer find meaning in athletics, there is a great possibility that they face the crisis of whether or not their life has meaning and if they have value as individuals. They haven't been prepared for what's next in their lives.

What can be done to better support Black male athletes? Could a system of incentives be built into these student athlete's contracts which requires them to get good grades in order to remain on a team? Would it be beneficial to enforce a rule in the NBA or NFL that requires a certain GPA in order to be drafted? One suggestion made by former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was that "any sports team failing to graduate at least 40% of its players should be ineligible for participation in post-season play and championship contests" (Harper, 2018, p.15). This would put pressure on the universities to ensure that their elite athletes were meeting standards in the classroom.

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The NCAA and league administrators need to establish some basic policies which protect the integrity of the athlete's education (Harper, 2018, p.15). Another recommendation which may help provide support for these athletes is to require the schools or the national conference to contribute a portion of the proceeds generated "from championships and other revenue sources back to member institutions for programming and other interventions that aim to improve racial equity within and beyond sports" (Harper, 2018, p.15).

"Perhaps nowhere in higher education is the disenfranchisement of black male students more insidious than in college athletics" (Harper, 2018). For Black male student-athletes, the expectation is that they will perform for their team and the betterment of the collegiate sports program rather than their own education. Black male athletes are told from a very young age that they need to focus on sports and not as much on getting an education. Sports can be a way out of poverty, but not everyone can be the next LeBron James. What are athletes to do when they end up retired or injured early in life and don't have a degree? These athletes, without financial literacy, technical or social skills, have little chance of picking themselves up and making a new life for themselves.

It is important to mention some of the limitations of the studies I have used to support my argument. First, I do not give statistics on White athletes in terms of treatment at institutions and how they fare after college. It is possible that many White athletes also have trouble financially and socially. In addition, I only looked at data for PWIs. While it can be expected that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have better rates of success for Black male athletes, I did not delve into

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statistics on this. Finally, I only use data that is representative of the NBA and the NFL.

It would be beneficial to look at data for other sports that are predominately White, such as lacrosse and hockey. Regardless, it is clear that the families of these Black male athletes and the PWIs that they attend are not thinking about the overall future of these young men, but more about what can be done to make money. This is a dangerous path, but a very prevalent one nonetheless. Perhaps by continuing to monitor and analyze this information in the years to come, society will be able to treat the Black male student-athlete as a student first and an athlete second.

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