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It's No Secret, it's Racism

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It's No Secret, it's Racism

Abstract

In the world of high level sports, it is everywhere you look. When you watch sports on television it is obvious. It is on the sideline and in the announcer's voice. There are many objective examples that support what you are seeing and hearing, but are these examples just a coincidence? It is the reason Larry Bird is known for his cunning and witty characteristics on the basketball court and the same reason Michael Vick became known as a great quarterback for his foot speed rather than ability to read the defense. The "it" I am referring to is the social construct that depicts black athletes as physical specimens with natural ability and white athletes as witty and hardworking. The success of black athletes is often undermined by the notion that much of their ability comes naturally to them, and this ability allows them to overcome their lack of IQ within their given sport. White athletes are praised for having great leadership ability and being extremely hardworking. The notorious phrase associated with this social construct is, "White men can't jump." This paper will point out some of the areas in sports we see this construct, why we are conditioned to view black and white athletes this way, and the implications of it all.

Keywords

Racial stereotyping; sports

Disciplines

Africana Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Sports Studies

Comments

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It's no Secret, it's Racism

In the world of high level sports, it is everywhere you look. When you watch sports on television it is obvious. It is on the sideline and in the announcer's voice. There are many objective examples that support what you are seeing and hearing, but are these examples just a coincidence? It is the reason Larry Bird is known for his cunning and witty characteristics on the basketball court and the same reason Michael Vick became known as a great quarterback for his foot speed rather than ability to read the defense. The "it" I am referring to is the social construct that depicts black athletes as physical specimens with natural ability and white athletes as witty and hardworking. The success of black athletes is often undermined by the notion that much of their ability comes naturally to them, and this ability allows them to overcome their lack of IQ within their given sport. White athletes are praised for having great leadership ability and being extremely hardworking. The notorious phrase associated with this social construct is, "White men can't jump." This paper will point out some of the areas in sports we see this construct, why we are conditioned to view black and white athletes this way, and the implications of it all.

In an interview with ESPN reporter Jim Gray, Larry Bird was quoted saying, "As far as playing, I didn't care who guarded me- red, yellow, black... I just didn't want a white guy guarding me. Because it's disrespect to my game" (Bird, 2004). There is obvious irony in this statement being that Larry Bird is white, but there is a story behind this remark. Larry Bird is almost unanimously considered the greatest white basketball player of all time. On the surface this statement sounds as if Bird is just making a funny

comment, given the fact that he dominated a sport that has been historically dominated by black players. The real reason Bird would be inclined to make a comment like this is due to the normalization of this stereotype amongst white and black athletes dating back to the early 1800s.

At that time the media was looking for an explanation as to why black athletes such as boxer Peter Jackson or bicyclist Marshal "Major" Taylor were outperforming prominent white athletes (Stone, Sjomeling, Lynch & Darley, 1999). Coaches, social scientists, biologists and doctors tried to justify this by arguing blacks were genetically different from whites and possessed physical characteristics that were unique to their "species." For some of these theorists their reasoning stemmed from slavery. Arguing that the hardship of slavery weeded out the weak links of the African-American race, and the most adaptive physical characteristics were passed down. Many of these allegations were obviously made at an archaic time, nevertheless, there is still speculation of these claims today. This is because there has been no scientific evidence to prove why black athletes have disproportionately dominated certain sports, and positions within those sports, that place a higher premium on physical characteristics. As recently as 1971, Martin Kane, a writer for *Sports Illustrated*, published an article claiming blacks had anatomical advantages over whites. He argued they had greater bone density, larger adrenal glands and "hyper-extensibility" in their joints (Coogan, 2013). In addition to these anatomic advantages, Kane also claimed black people have a psychological advantage over whites because they have a carefree attitude which allows them to perform better under pressure. These claims made by Kane are overtly racist and have no scientific backing to them.

Socioeconomic factors play a major role in who participates in which sports, particularly at the youth level. On average, black households make significantly less than the average white household. This helps to explain why blacks are less likely to participate in sports such as golf, lacrosse or tennis at a young age (Rowley & Graham, 1999). What may be more telling in terms of which people choose to play which sport would come from how they identify themselves. There is no expectation of what a white person is supposed to be like or do. Being black has become associated with athleticism due to the stereotype of black athletes as naturally athletic. More specifically, to some, being black can be associated with athletic success in basketball, football and track and field. For many black youth, in order for them to feel immersed in the black culture, they will pursue sports that are associated with blackness (Harrison, Harrison & Moore, 2002). Athletic success can be seen as a marker for status within the black community, which may incentivize young black athletes to train harder and be persistent in their pursuit of success within that sport. This theory could be more telling as to why black athletes dominate the sports of basketball, football and track and field. Young black athletes often times have a greater purpose to push towards. Also, given the economic disadvantage many black children grow up with, they often see sports as a way to dig themselves out of their undesirable circumstance. These factors provide a more logical explanation for why black athletes appear to be more physically gifted than white athletes. Ultimately, there will always be outliers which disprove the notion that there is any genetic reason for black athletes' physical capabilities. There are many black people who are not athletic and do not possess outstanding physical characteristics, and there are many white people who do possess great athleticism.

Assuming there is validity to the argument for black athleticism to stem from their pursuit of their own identity, this still shows that the color of their skin alone, is not what propels them to have great physical traits. Therefore, the racial stereotypes in sports are not scientifically true, they are just stereotypes.

Baseball is the third most popular American professional sport behind football and basketball. Major League Baseball (MLB) is not comprised of predominantly black players, but amongst the black players in the league there are telling statistics that are in alignment with the stereotype for black athletes. For a thirty-year period (1967-1999) Major-league outfielders were 40% black, even though over that time period black players never made up more than 18.7% of the league (Armour & Levitt, 2017). Additionally, black players have been significantly underrepresented at pitcher and catcher. They have only made up between 2-3% of Major-league pitchers from the 2004-2016 seasons, and there have been only a handful of black catchers over that same time period (Armour & Levitt, 2017). As previously mentioned these numbers are aligned with the stereotypes for black and white athletes. Outfielders must have great speed to track down fly balls, but the position does not require great mental capacity. Pitcher and catcher are the two most important positions on the field. The pitcher and catcher work together to outwit the batter by choosing different pitches to throw and locations to throw. They must do this while also paying attention to the runners on base and what the ball and strike count is. Pitcher and catcher are much more mentally rigorous than outfield, but also do not require as much physical athleticism.

Similar patterns are evident in football. In football, positions like quarterback, which require great leadership, intellect and poise, are disproportionately stacked with

white players. During the 2015 NFL season only 14% of quarterbacks who attempted a least 100 passes were black (Knoss, 2017). Contrarily, positions such as running back or wide receiver, which require great physical attributes, are stacked with black players (Coogan, 2013). In the world of track and field black runners dominate the 100-meter dash, which purely tests raw speed. There have also been instances of racially stacking positions in English soccer (Coogan, 2013). None of these examples suggest racism from the coaches or trainers putting players in these positions, but it helps explain why people are conditioned to view black and white athletes the way they do.

There is no position in sports that requires the characteristics associated with successful white athletes more than the coach. Coaching is another area of sports dominated by whites. A coach must be hardworking, demonstrate leadership and have a great knowledge of the sport. At the college and pro levels where coaching is considered a full time job, basketball coaches were 86% white and football and baseball coaches were 95% white (Sartore & Cunningham, 2006). In addition to coaching front office and executive positions within sports organizations have also been dominated by whites. In basketball and football specifically, where black athletes make up the majority of participants at the highest levels, this suggests a presence of racism from higher-ups who have the authority to hire coaches and executives. Although, one can only speculate the biases of people in such positions, so there is no evidence to prove that racism is the root cause of the disproportionate amount of white coaches and executives. This is in line with America's history of white people being in positions of power and benefitting off blacks' physical exertion and abilities. Black athletes' presence in positions of athleticism and power and the disproportionate whiteness in coaching are

visuals that give rise to racial stereotypes in sports. Visuals alone, however, are not what create and maintain a stereotype. What creates and maintains a stereotype is what we hear, because what we hear often times become what we think, say and know. The verbal spreading of racial stereotypes in sports is primarily the fault of the media.

The time of overt racism is essentially gone in the world of sports broadcasting, but it does not diminish the presence of subtle racism. In a study conducted to test the patterns of commentary on athletes of different races 140 college basketball games were analyzed. Two-thirds were men's games and the rest were women's. The study found that when announcers were talking about black players they were more likely to make comments regarding their quickness or athletic ability. Comments made about white players were more likely to praise them as great shooters, a skill that does not require great physical attributes, and as players with high intelligence (Eastman & Billings, 2001). A similar study was conducted to test if audiences could acknowledge subtle racial biases in sports journalism. The participants were asked to identify the race of the player the announcer was describing. The results showed that more than half of the participants were able to identify the race of the player being described (Ferruci, Tandoc, Painter & Leshner, 2013). Another experiment had participants read paragraphs from published newspapers or online articles describing certain baseball players. These articles were categorized by seven different descriptors- intelligence, leadership, personality, work ethic, physical strength, natural ability and background. Participants were asked to identify the race of the athlete described using these descriptors. One article describing an unidentified baseball player with high levels of intelligence led to 78% of participants identifying that player as white based off of the

descriptor (Ferruci, Tandoc, Painter & Leshner, 2013). The sports media's portrayal and analysis of black quarterbacks has been another factor that has contributed to the stereotype for black athletes. When black quarterbacks have success it is frequently credited to their athletic ability rather than cognitive abilities. On the other hand, for white quarterbacks, when they lack success it is often due to their lack of athleticism (Ferruci, Tandoc, Painter & Leshner, 2013). These examples provide insight into the predisposed thoughts people have about athletes based on their race. Priming theory is also evident based on the results of these experiments. Priming theory claims that when people receive information, they will use the most easily accessible information in their mind in order to make sense of the new information (Ferruci, Tandoc, Painter & Leshner, 2013). When people listen to the media speak about and portray black and white athletes according to their respective stereotypes, individuals will be quicker to use these stereotypes to make sense of their perception of an athlete. What is interesting is that when people become aware that they are making stereotypical judgements they try to avoid them due to the negative connotation of stereotyping (Ferruci, Tandoc, Painter & Leshner, 2013). If people stop making these judgements verbally, it does not change how they perceive things. Unfortunately, the sports media's portrayal of athletes contributes to the perceptions people have of athletes based on their race.

Racial stereotypes in sports are so engrained in American culture that the athletes themselves are obviously aware of the generalizations made about them based on their race. This inevitable awareness can have negative consequences on the athletes. Being the target of a negative social stereotype is harmful to the individual and

can lead to defensive action (Stone, Sjomeling, Lynch & Darley, 1999). Initially, one may not think of either stereotype on black or white athletes to be negative. In the case of black athletes' natural talent, physical strength and athleticism are positive qualities. For white athletes' intelligence, leadership and being hardworking are also positive qualities. However, these generalizations also imply that the following athlete is lacking of the other races qualities. An experiment tested an even sample of black and white participants and framed the test they took in different contexts. The test consisted of a written test asking questions about the game of golf and also included the participants playing ten holes of golf. The participants used all had similar backgrounds in the game of golf. For black athletes when the test was framed as a measure of natural athletic ability they tended to perform higher than when it was framed as a measure of sports intelligence. The opposite results showed for white participants. This experiment does not prove anything, but supports the notion that black and white athletes, to an extent, buy into the stereotypes placed on themselves. The implications of this can effect athletes' performance or attempts to pursue other athletic options. For instance, a black athlete may be hesitant to play golf even if they have the resources to do so because they believe that they are not supposed to play golf. Similarly, a white person may be cautious to try out for the basketball team because they think they do not belong in that sport. The negative effects of stereotypes are prevalent when they begin to discourage those effected by them. The generalizations made for black and white athletes clearly can have negative consequences for both sides, but the history of America shows in the primarily negative consequences black athletes suffer because of the stereotype.

A large part of American history is not something to be proud of. The dehumanization and overall mistreatment of black people is one of the most disgraceful aspects of American history, and it is unfortunate that the stereotypes for black athletes stems from the degradation of black people. As mentioned earlier, characterizing black athletes as fast, explosive and powerful is not degrading. The notion that black athletes are lazy, not coachable and unintelligent is blatantly racist. There are obviously black athletes who fit this stereotype, but there are white athletes whose behavior and actions would be consistent with the black athlete stereotype. There are also black athletes who fit the stereotype put on white athletes, but those qualities would often be overlooked due to their skin color. Why this stereotype is most degrading to black athletes is because the positive attributes they are generalized to have can be used to degrade their athletic success. When they praise black athletes for their speed and power, but claim most of it is god given that undercuts their success. This also leads to blacks being characterized as lazy because they do not need to work as hard to be successful in their sport. The real sadness of the stereotype is that it is used as a crutch for white people, mainly in sports such as football and basketball. For example, a white person who has trouble defending a black person in basketball has the ability to say, "I'm white," and use that as an excuse for not being able to guard his black opponent. While this would not be a valid excuse to make to a coach, amongst this white player's peers it would be considered valid. On the flip side when a white player outperforms a black player it reflects poorly on the black player, whereas if the black player outperforms the white player it is expected. Non black athletes are also more likely to receive praise and media attention when they perform well in sports dominated by blacks. Two examples of

this would be Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin. Tebow was the quarterback for the University of Florida during one of their most successful stretches. Over his career Tim Tebow received extensive praise and media coverage for his great leadership and relentless effort, but never more than during his stint as starting quarterback with the Denver Broncos. In the month of December, 2011 Tebow was the most talked about athlete on ESPN in spite of relatively mediocre statistics (Coogan, 2013). Tebow was very deserving of this praise, but patterns show that had a black athlete performed at the level Tebow did, they would not have garnered equal attention. Jeremy Lin is an Asian basketball player, but his successful string of games became dubbed "Linsanity." While this was very intriguing, there had been numerous accounts of black athletes who performed at a similar level to Lin over the course of a few games who received minimal to no media attention (Coogan, 2013). While Lin is not white, it shows how in a sport like basketball it is easier to gain respect and attention if you are not black.

What is interesting about this stereotype is that, for the most part, it does not bother black or white athletes. Blacks are quick to praise whites who have success in sports dominated by blacks. Similarly, whites seem to embrace the role of underdog in sports dominated by blacks. It is the fact that the stereotype exists that is the problem. The story behind the stereotype comes back to racism. In America, black people have always been fighting an uphill battle and still are to this day. This stereotype proves that when black athletes have success there is a catch to it, but not when white athletes have success. This is a reminder of how deeply entrenched racism is in American culture. Fortunately, overt racism has become much less common in recent years, but subtle racism is everywhere. It is a part of America, and stereotypes are the fuel to its

fire. Until subtle racism is gone, racism will always be prevalent, by making a conscious effort to avoid stereotyping, one can take a step in the right direction to help bridge the gap between races in America.

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