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Julia E. Koller  
*Gettysburg College*

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## The Narrative of Black Athletes in the National Hockey League

### Abstract

Major league sports have existed in the United States since the 1920s; today we have four major league sports - the National Football League, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League, and Major League Soccer. All of these sports have changed drastically, especially their demographics. All throughout the 20th century, Black people had fought for rights, both in and out of sports. This paper explores the narrative of Black players in the National Hockey League. Factors such as, socioeconomic status, interest level, and racism look to explain why so few players in the NHL are Black.

### Keywords

National Hockey League, Black hockey players, racism in ice hockey

### Disciplines

Africana Studies | Sports Studies

### Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sport

The Narrative of Black Athletes in the National Hockey League

Julia Koller

Professor Tyeshia Redden

December 10, 2019

Major league sports have existed in the United States since the 1920s; today we have four major league sports - the National Football League, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League, and Major League Soccer. While hockey was founded in Canada, the United States still recognizes it as a major league sport. All of these sports have changed drastically, especially their demographics. All throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black people had fought for rights, both in and out of sports. For these major league sports, integration did not occur until the mid 1950s and even then, many Black players faced backlash. The majority of Black players were seen for their athletic ability through their speed and strength, but certainly not viewed as intellectual individuals. In the book "Forty Million Dollar Slaves" by William C. Rhoden, he quotes Jimmy Snyder when he says "...I'm telling you that the Black is the better athlete and he practices to be the better athlete and he's bred to be the better athlete...", in which Snyder relates breeding back to the Civil War days when Black people had to be stronger (Rhoden, 2006, pg. xii). There is a narrative in the United States where, especially during and before the 1950s, White people could not view Black people to be equal to themselves. They were taught and believed that they were superior to Black people and thus could not associate with them. However, with the admission that Black people were better than White people at sports, it led this narrative that Black people were better at something than White people. However, instead of accepting this admission, they tried to stamp out or stop Black people from being better than White people. Rhoden describes this phenomenon as Jockey Syndrome, "This fear triggered a mostly unconscious, knee-jerk reaction to Black success by mainstream White society: changing rules and changing relationships to either eliminate or mute the Black presence..." (Rhoden, 2006, pg. 60). This Jockey Syndrome was witnessed throughout all different sports and the similarity was staggering. Whenever a Black player did something exceptionally well such as, Willie Mays'

basket catch or R.C. Owens blocking a field goal attempt, something was changed to stop players, especially Black players, from doing it again. The history of sports and Black people in sports has been challenged and thus created stereotypes along the way. The stereotype of being less intellectually capable, but stronger and faster has followed us to modern day sports. There is a clear racial divide in professional sports with racism and the socioeconomic status of families across the United States and Canada being the driving factors.

The world of sports today is worth billions of dollars with many players being as, if not more, famous than artists or other celebrities. The sports industry has captivated our country and thus funneled money into the different organizations. With more money in the organization, the more money in the player's pockets. However, not every player in these different sports has grown up with money – with some players even growing up in poverty. Unfortunately, many are Black players who grow up in low income families, rather than White players. In 2018, the median household income for White families in the United States was \$68,145 (U.S. Census, 2018) However, for Black families in the United States, the 2017 average household income was almost \$30,000 lower at \$40,258, which was the lowest income among racial groups (U.S. Census, 2018). Of the United States, 13.4% is Black (U.S. Census). In Canada, the racial wage gap is also quite large. For university educated, Canadian born White people, the average income is \$70,196 CAD (\$52,954.73 US) compared to \$61,381 CAD (\$46,304.84 USD) for minorities (Conferenceboard, 2017). In 2016, it was reported that of Canada, only 3.5% of the country was Black, however it is also important to point out that Canada is one of the most minority dense countries in the world (StatCan, 2019). Within these two countries, there is a clear racial divide showing a stark difference in the income of Black versus White families. To further compare the two countries is from the perspective of ice hockey.

After analyzing the racial gap in income between both the U.S. and Canada, it is also important to analyze the number of Black players in these sports. From a fan's point of view, it is clear that some sports, like football and basketball, Black players are much more prevalent, while in hockey, there are many fewer Black players. Within football and basketball, "...being African American denotes an identification, either directly or indirectly with specific sports activities" (Harrison et al., 2002). Being able to identify more with certain sports due to similarities is clear. In the NFL, Black players make up 69.7% of the league, with White players making up 27.4% (Atlas, 2017). In the NBA, 74.4% of players are Black and 19.1% White (Atlas, 2018). However, the National Hockey League is a different story. In the NHL, there are 31 teams, with a twenty-three-man roster cap for each team. By this, there are 713 active NHL players to date (NHL). For the 2019-2020 season, there were a total of 29 Black players, making that a staggeringly low 4.1% (NHL). Compared to the NFL and NBA, this is an outstandingly low number, but the question still remains of why there are so few Black players in the National Hockey League.

To answer that question to some degree, the economic cost of each sport should be discussed. To begin learning how to play soccer and basketball, only one item is needed – a ball. One could argue that for basketball a hoop is also needed, but it is not absolutely necessary. To play football, a football is needed. When one enters tackle football, more equipment is needed. However, to begin playing these sports only a ball, respective to the sport is needed. Ice hockey is a completely different story. First, in hockey you need to learn how to skate. This requires hockey skates which range anywhere from \$50 to \$800. The next item needed is ice. The majority of families do not have an ice rink in the same fashion that they do a driveway for basketball or grass for football and soccer. Thus, membership to an ice rink is needed. This cost ranges, but to excel at skating, a lot of practice is needed. Memberships to ice hockey rinks are

not uniform across the United States and Canada, but the fee is on average \$150 for a winter season. Other limitations include the price of gas and having someone who is able and willing to drive to and from the ice rink. Learning how to skate is usually done at a young age, so someone who has the free time and ability to drive must be present. This is difficult to find, especially when both parents work. The total for learning how to skate already equals anywhere from \$200 to \$950. Once the ability to skate is achieved, playing hockey begins. GlobalNews (2014) explained the cost breakdown (CAD) of playing hockey in the Toronto area: \$3,500 season hockey fee, \$220 game fee (\$6 per game x 36 games), \$220 spectator fee (\$6 per game x 36 games), \$1,000 approximate cost of hotels, gas, meals for away tournaments, \$500 updating equipment every year, and \$50 skate sharpening. All of this cumulates to about \$5,500 CAD per season, which equates to \$4149.11 USD per season. For players who make it to the NHL, they will start playing organized hockey around the age of 3 and continue on playing until they reach 18 when they can be drafted. This combined is approximately 15 years and will cost about \$82,500 CAD (\$62,322.15 USD). It is not possible for a Black family in the U.S. or Canada to support those costs making only \$40,258 USD or \$61,381 CAD (\$46,304.84 USD). It is simply easier for a low-income child to choose a different sport to play than hockey.

For those players who are Black and chose to play hockey, it is found that many of them do not fit the aforementioned low-income family description. For many U.S. and Canadian Black families, their socioeconomic status holds them back from participating in anything that is too costly. The question remains about those few Black players that are in the National Hockey League and what led them to playing hockey. One very famous Black hockey player in the NHL is P.K. Subban, who is arguably the most famous active Black player. P.K Subban and his brother, Malcolm (who also plays in the NHL) grew up in a very affluent neighborhood right

outside of Toronto to two parents who both immigrated to Canada (Canadian Encyclopedia). After immigrating to Canada, his father sought out education, where he thereafter started working a white-collar job and became a school principal for 28 years (Canadian Encyclopedia). Jarome Iginla is a retired NHL player who grew up in Canada to a father that was a lawyer (Sports Illustrated Vault, 2007). Mike Grier, an American retired Black hockey player had a father that was a Detroit Lions assistant coach before he moved to work for the New England Patriots (Encyclopedia). Many people have also probably heard about Ronald Jerome “Popeye” Jones who was a former NBA player and a current assistant coach for the Indiana Pacers – his son is Seth Jones, a current NHL star (Fox Sports, 2012). Other fans have heard of Willard Reaves, who played both in the Canadian Football League as well as the National Football League for the Miami Dolphins, but other fans know his son, Ryan who currently plays for the Vegas Golden Knights of the NHL (Windsor Start, 2010). Along the same lines, active player, Justin Bailey is the son of Carlton Bailey, a retired Buffalo Bills player (NHL, 2013). These are seven different examples of Black hockey players that grew up not fitting the Black stereotype of having a lower socioeconomic status. While it is also clear that not everyone fits their prescribed stereotype, the presence of Black hockey players in the NHL is an anomaly. Instead of the sport being about race like some say, it is clearly also about economics and the socioeconomic status of families that deters families from playing hockey. Unfortunately, by the numbers, we do see an inequality of income from Black and White families and thus so few Black hockey players.

Another narrative of Black hockey players is their position on the ice and how they contribute during games. Ice hockey, especially at the professional level is one the most dangerous and intense games. Fist fights are allowed, which tend to leave both players bloody. In the world of hockey, a team can greatly benefit from employing an “enforcer” on the ice. This



enforcer has the purpose of being more physical with other players – laying out big hits and in some cases, starting a fight. Since fighting has been allowed in the NHL, enforcers have proven very valuable to a team. Being a defenseman is another position in hockey where the main goal is to defend the puck when the opposing team is trying to score. Of these two positions, one common theme between them is that neither tends to score goals. This is important because scoring goals in the NHL is what helps to win games and eventually do well as a team. The players that can score goals are also the ones that are usually the “face” of the team and in many cases either captain or assistant captain. Out of the Black players in the league, there is a common link with their positions either being the “enforcer” or a defenseman. While these players are still valuable on the ice, there is a resemblance to football where there are very few Black quarterbacks, who are also most often viewed as the “face” of the organization. The lack of both Black quarterbacks and hockey forwards (who score most goals) is that both positions require a high level of intelligence. Even when both sports became integrated, the level of Jockey Syndrome was still prevalent in both sports. While they were allowed to play, there was no allowance of Black players to become better than the White stars that the game already had. It is argued that P.K. Subban has single-handedly done more to motivate young Black children to choose hockey than Black players before him. The reasoning behind this is his talent. He is good, if not better than other White players in the league, which made him a star. Young Black players could now see similarities between themselves and the game of hockey, which helped them be more inclined to join.

Having so few Black hockey players has contributed to a new stereotype of children not wanting to play hockey because of their race. While money within a family is still a contributing factor, we are seeing more and more Black children write off playing hockey, even if they can

afford it. As a society, we choose to participate in activities where we see like people – we try and find as many possible similarities. Gilman Whiting of *The Conversation* (2015) writes, “Over 100 students from all races, socio-economic backgrounds and geographic regions largely conclude that it is due two reasons: low interest (possibly due to stereotypes of hockey as a “White sport”), and little access to opportunity and training”. The issue of little access to opportunity and training has already been discussed, but the other issue is having no interest. If Black children grow up in our dominate sports society and do not see players with which they can identify, it could deter them from having any interest in participating. Hockey is predominately viewed as a “White” sport along with golf, swimming, rowing crew, and tennis (*The Conversation*, 2015). Poniatowski and Whiteside (2012) analyze NBC’s media coverage of the 2006 Olympics where only one Black player was playing hockey. They explore the concept of “Whiteness” within this media coverage and conclude, “Whiteness in sports reflects a type of heroic masculinity, reflecting exceptional physical bodies, intellectual aptitude, and moral righteousness” (Poniatowski and Whiteside, 2012). This concept of masculinity and intelligence seems to only fit the image of the White man. When a Black player comes in, it almost taints this image and somehow makes the sport inherently less masculine or intelligent.

With these views, racism is also questioned within these sports. Lorrenz and Murray (2014) write about a controversial comment made during a popular Canadian T.V. segment commenting on hockey. One of the hosts, Don Cherry, commented that hockey is the one sport in the world that does not have racism, which was said in response to when a former Aboriginal coach discussed times he experienced racism (Lorrenz and Murray, 2014). Lorrenz and Murray (2014) write, “This exchange between Cherry and MacLean [Aboriginal coach] illustrates both the unwillingness to acknowledge that racism could be a factor in hockey, and the notion that

Canada is supposed to be a place where “race” never enters the equation”. This is a classic theme that has been prevalent for many years; White people have a hard time admitting that racism exists. Canadians especially have this view that they are better than Americans and do not think their country could be racist. A lot of these views come from the fact that Canada has a larger minority population than America. They believe that because they are more open to minorities (usually immigrants) that they cannot be a racist country. The truth, however, is that racism is a contributor to the views within hockey and is unfortunately still prevalent today.

The narrative of segregation fed into the opposing views of Black professional athletes. If Black athletes were equal to White athletes, I believe that there would be more strides within the racial wage gap and “White” versus “Black” dominated sports wouldn’t exist to the same degree, if at all. Racism absolutely contributes to the stereotype of “White” sports, but there is a divide between both the United States and Canada. The racial make-up of minorities in Canada is higher than in the United States. Racism still exists in both countries, but there is a difference in Canada since hockey is as commonplace and popular as football in America. This speaks to the severity of the two reasons behind why Black children shy away from hockey in Canada. In a society and country where Black children are deterred from the most popular sport, it unveils the magnitude of this issue.

The lingering question is what society can do to rectify these problems and blur the lines between the inherently “Black” or “White” sports. In this case, where hockey is trying to recruit other talent outside of the “White” stereotype, Black hockey players have a platform that they must use. Not all Black professional athletes, artists, and influencers must use their platform to speak out and stand up for racial equality. However, in this game that is so outwardly dominated by White people, it can be beneficial for platforms to be used. As mentioned before, P.K. Subban

holds a very high status among NHL players and spoke out against racism after he heard of a young Black hockey player that was experiencing racist comments. The small act of posting a video telling the little boy to keep pushing forward and to not let other people stand in his way spoke to the little boy, other young players, and the entire hockey world. That little boy was able to find the similarity between him and P.K. Subban, which helped to bridge that racial gap. Other people heard and saw the video too and helped raise awareness about young Black hockey players who before, did not see a lot of people that looked like them playing the same sport, but now do. Speaking in terms of role models, "...the presence of someone who may have endured similar trials to what another is going through can serve as an incredible motivational factor in the face of adversity... whether in hockey or outside, [players] served as consistent reminders that they, too, could overcome the emotional strife they were enduring..." (Simkins, 2013). Finding similarities between yourself and an athlete speaks to greater depths and encourages greater interest in the game of hockey. Another player, J.T. Brown used his platform in the form of raising a fist above his head because he, "wanted to bring awareness to police brutality against minorities and racial inequality" (Tampa Bay Times, 2017). These are examples of when athletes who use their platform spark a conversation about racial inequality both in and outside of the game of hockey; they are using their platform to help erase the "White" sport stereotype in hopes of other young kids being able to play whichever sport they choose, no matter their race.

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