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African-American Men in Modern U.S. Basketball and Football: The Exploitation of Collegiate Athletes and Underrepresentation in Coaching

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by

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Abstract

Racial inequalities have prevailed since the establishment of the United States government in 1776. Despite the moral wrongdoings that took place in this country's past and laws which have been put in place to combat this, African Americans are still marginalized. Looking through the window to the sport world, this is still present as collegiate athletes of African-American descent are exploited in the two sports which generate the most revenue in American sport—football and basketball. Beyond the role of the athlete, Black men are restricted in the coaching world as well, as they are wildly underrepresented. Research provides understanding as to why microcosms of racism are at the forefront of the sport world, affecting the lives of young Black men in modern American society.

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Introduction

From the outside looking in, athletes who make it to the highest level of their respective sport are living out the dream of millions of people across the United States—one full of fame and riches, belonging to the top echelon of society. Although all seems well in the exclusive sports realm, athletes cannot escape the awful effects of racism that have permeated American society for decades. Fans wear their jersey number and scream their name without even knowing these men. Elite athletes are placed on pedestals for all to admire, but those pedestals act as judgement seats where they may be torn apart if they don't convert enough third downs or miss the game winning shot. Skill and charisma appear to overpower skin tone, as many Americans finally are rooting for the success of African-American men, but this admiration is conditional. In an industry where different races seem to finally be on a level playing field, research shows that the history of racism in the U.S. pervades many aspects of the sporting world.

The U.S. claims to be one of the most developed societies in the world, yet faces ongoing racial inequities in the sports industry. In recent years, young African-American men have dominated the so-called “major revenue-producing sports” known to be football and basketball. It can be said that they are vital to the success and prominence of these sports in the sport industry. Despite the successes that may be achieved in sport, “it has been argued that sport produces stereotypes, prejudices, and myths about groups and people of color, which have contributed to both discrimination against and an underrepresentation of people of color within certain sports” (Clark 16). Particularly at the collegiate level, this leads to enormous amounts of exploitation, in multiple different ways. When these young men pursue coaching careers, there is a clear underrepresentation of African-American coaches in football and basketball at both the collegiate and professional levels. The wrongdoings must be exposed. Changes are being put into

motion, but it is not enough. African-American men deserve equal treatment and representation in the sport industry.

Racism African Americans Face in Modern U.S. Sport

Critical Race Theory and Colorblindness

To understand how American society is so permissible to the way in which minorities, specifically African-American men, are treated and perceived, the Critical Race Theory, otherwise referred to as CRT, must be explained. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a law professor at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School eloquently defines CRT as “a way of seeing, attending to, accounting for, tracing and analyzing the ways that race is produced; the ways that racial inequality is facilitated, and the ways that our history has created these inequalities that now can be almost effortlessly reproduced unless we attend to the existence of these inequalities” (Fortin).

The socioeconomic and educational inequalities present in the Black community today can be explained by this theory. Little has been done to improve the situations regarding their status in society or their availability to quality educational resources. It will continue to be this way because society facilitates racism due to the lack of change and progress. By claiming racism is a product of law and government systems rather than individual prejudices, the subtle, yet systemic racism that remains today is explained.

CRT challenges the paragon of a color-blind society, in which rather than acknowledging race, this demographic is ignored as though it does not exist. This happens because all people are to be viewed as equals. Although on the surface the ideology of color-blindness may seem as though it could solve the issues of race because it attempts to eliminate that factor entirely, it is not practical whatsoever. This way of thinking is unrealistic simply because race cannot

disappear. This mindset throws out the notion that race-based differences matter because race altogether is being ignored. This is detrimental to racial progress because society gets nowhere by taking race out of the picture and not allowing people to discuss it and work through the many issues that arise regarding race. The fact that no two people are wired the exact same way proves that differences are important. Differences relating to race can also be empowering and are important to one's identity. More often than not, color blindness acts as a universal justification that White people use to get away with the racial inequalities present in modern society (Clark 2). By claiming one does not see race they continue to treat people in the same way, under the belief that they can get away with things such as exploiting athletes and not hiring African Americans to fill head coach positions.

The Media's Influence on Racism in Sports Today

As is the case with any social issue in today's world, the media strongly influences people's opinions, often before they can even form their own. The media moves quicker than ever in modern society, spreading global news within a matter of seconds. While there have been many innovations to this form of communication over the years, it has always been understood the impact that is present, whether positive or negative, on issues regarding people, places, and events. The media is run by people who voice their personal opinions and biases, intentional or not.

African Americans are unable to escape the grasps of media, in both sport and non-sport outlets. Through various media outlets, racial stereotypes and comments prevail. Society is flooded with "images glorifying African-American men who are successful by employing avenues connected with sports and reinforces the stereotype of African-American males as exclusively athletically talented (Beamon 352). For example, sport television networks contain

announcers who may heavily influence fans watching. Sport reporters continually discuss the belief in which African-American athletes are simply physical specimens who have God-given, natural abilities when it comes to sport, whereas White athletes are hardworking and more intellectually inclined, which is what drives their successes in sport (Clark 17). Alongside constantly commenting about athletic skills often seen in Black men, announcers and sport reporters make sure to mention how sport has helped the athletes move up in social status. It is true that many athletes of this demographic come from poor homes, but they tend to focus so much on their upbringing and how athletic talent alone helped them out of the grasps of poverty and the dangers that come, and many fall to, with living at a lower socioeconomic level. This further emphasizes to the young boys in the Black community the importance of sport if they want to make something of themselves.

It is not just African Americans who are following the media and being fed these stereotypes, but also White people and other racial groups. They too are being influenced to think this way and in turn, it impacts how they may treat or view Black athletes in society. They also see that sport is the only avenue available to them, while White people from a young age are encouraged to become doctors, lawyers, and educators, thus making up the majority in these fields. Black men are just as capable of pursuing careers such as these, but they do not see it. The media acts as a barrier for these young men because African-American athletes and entertainers have always received the most publicity for being successful (Hoberman 50). The praise and recognition given to African-American men in these fields is unlike any other. The youth see this and want to receive this level of respect, so they strive to be either an athlete or entertainer.

Fear of the African-American Male

“White America has a deep-seated trepidation and apprehension towards male African Americans” (Agyemang and Singer 14). There is a natural fear and anxiety that arises within people of the White race when unknown men of color are around them. Fear of the unknown is common and can explain these feelings towards African-American men. Seeing that they look different from themselves, strikes fear and a feeling of uneasiness.

This feeling is based off timeless racist ideologies that have been passed down for centuries. Much of this innate feeling can be traced to the time in which American slavery was taking place, throughout which White men perceived Black men as inferior. Developing a binary meaning of Black masculinity, they were viewed as submissive and of less intelligence as well as a threat to their own masculinity being violent and dishonest (Davis and Friedman 760). This caused White elites to feel the need to control and force them to the bottom of the totem pole which represents society. White men in power implemented ways in which they can assert their dominance or superiority, which is often referred to as “White supremacy.” White men, being intimidated by their appearance, sexuality, language, and system of beliefs, implemented laws to strip African-American men of their rights due to the irrational need to control a group of people who have a different level of pigmentation in their skin (Davis and Friedman 758). The Jim Crow laws, which were in effect from the 1880s until the 1960s, are a prime example of White men in power who strove to control the Black men in this country, making them an inferior group of people. These laws aimed to separate Whites from Blacks and other minorities. It created “the openly acceptable public discourses and displays of hatred that surrounded Blacks and their rising position in society” (Clark 1).

This deeply rooted fear has caused racist tendencies to continue to infiltrate American society, even when it comes to sports. While sports are often viewed as an outlet from the world and the events that surround people, Black men still face the serious issues that come about due to the simple fact that their skin is a different color than the majority of the people in the United States.

This fear translates to the National Basketball League, (NBA) which contains a majority of Black athletes (about 75 percent), as there have been policies put into place in order to maintain control over them because the men who hold the power fear situations are more likely to get out of hand when surrounded by this minority group. One change the NBA made in 2005 under former Commissioner David Stern was the dress code policy in which all athletes were required to dress professionally when arriving to their workplace (Agyemang and Singer 14). This was put into place because they wanted to steer these men away from the hip-hop culture in which it is common to dress much more leniently. This culture is stereotyped as a bad influence, so the NBA aimed to discourage association with hip-hop, fearing the negative image it could portray to viewers, especially those easily influenced, such as children.

When looking at matters in the National Football League (NFL) this issue is prevalent when looking at the difference of criminal allegations between White and Black men. Society tends to view any criminal allegations against an African-American man, whatever the case, as simply a part of their culture. Because of the socioeconomic status many African Americans live within and the educational limitations they face, there tends to be more trouble within the home. Being raised in this environment with the few role models they look up to, who get in the same trouble, explains why it appears to be so acceptable. Instead of trying to help these young men, society punishes them harsher than they would a White man.

When it comes to criminal allegations against the white athletes, such as the domestic abuse charges against Ben Roethlisberger, it is viewed as a lapse in judgement that is a rare occurrence (Agyemang and Singer 15). Despite these allegations from 2009 and 2010, Roethlisberger never faced criminal charges and went on to have a successful NFL career where he did not retire until just last season in 2022. In his case, people seemed to be able to separate these allegations from his talent and many admired him throughout the remainder of his career. The same is rare for African-American men and the generalized fear of this demographic is what makes this so difficult to do. They are feared so they get more blame and face harsher allegations and consequences when it comes to criminal activity or accusations. People begin to identify them with their crimes and are less forgiving of their actions.

While the fear of this specified race of people correlates to the desire to control them in a societal sense, these ideas relate to the practice of the exploitation of these young men in college athletics. So much of their lives, on the field or court and off, are determined by factors or people beyond themselves. This phenomenon can clearly be traced back to the issues stated previously, especially when the comparison between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and slavery is brought to the table. The labor levels present in intercollegiate athletics is undeniably exploitative because those who hold the power look over the ethics involved due to the benefits they receive from the performance of the Black athletes they control.

Exploitation of Collegiate African American Male Athletes

The Issue of Exploitation Defined

Exploitation can be defined as taking advantage of or treating someone unfairly to profit or benefit off their work. Some definitions include the terms “overworking” and “underpaying.” The term exploitation often refers to someone or a group of people who are being taken

advantage of by a selfish, more powerful person or entity. Another definition refers to how resources may be exploited. In the scene of college athletics, oftentimes it appears as though the athletes are simply just resources, whom are both overworked and underpaid, that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) uses to benefit off in order to make billions of dollars each year, none of which makes its way back to the athletes themselves. Initially, the NCAA organization was established to “combat the injuries and the ethics of unregulated college sports, as well as oversee the partnership between college education and sports” (Walsh 84). Football was becoming a quite dangerous sport and the general public’s worry was growing. With the creation of the NCAA, backed by President of the United States at the time, Theodore Roosevelt, rules and regulations were put into place which cleaned up the game to protect athletes. It also protected the universities from potential lawsuits. In the modern era of sport, it appears as though the NCAA is the driving force behind the exploitation that occurs to student athletes. No longer is their goal to keep athletes safe but they aim to create as much revenue as possible. Unfortunately, this comes at the expensed of NCAA student athletes, especially those participating in football and basketball, the sports which generate the most revenue.

The dominant White group in American society has historically relied on African Americans for the needs and material gains they can provide, usually unwillingly (Clark 9). This is not far from the truth of what is occurring now. In fact, according to the *Journal of Negro Education*, a study was done which involved ethnographic interviews of former African American athletes at Division 1 programs. The interviews revealed that there was a common and prevailing feeling of being taken advantage of and thus they perceived themselves as “used goods” (Beamon 352). Student athletes, regardless of race or ethnicity, serve as the manual labor for collegiate sport organizations. Regardless of whether these athletes lead their team to success

or not, they are targets for various forms of exploitation. In the sports of football and basketball, African Americans are taken advantage of more. Statistics prove that because more of them make up the football and basketball teams at the hundreds of universities that offer their sport, the exploitation has more of an impact on them. This means they are more gullible to the exploitation thus face more negative effects as often they are less prepared for life outside of sport when compared to their White teammates and classmates.

The exploitation that African-American male student athletes experience on a day-to-day basis can be categorized into separate sectors, which includes economic, academic, and developmental exploitation. These types of exploitation are also referred to as “deviant behavior because all break prescribed academic norms, rules, regulations, goals, and/or expectations (some illegal); whether at the organizational level (e.g., by the administration as an entity); or an individual administrator at the occupational level; by the faculty as an entity; or an individual faculty member at the occupational level (Murty and Roebuck 430). Student athletes do not receive the same treatment as the non-athletes students on campus. It may seem as though they are benefiting from the way in which people view them, but in reality it is often detrimental to their academic and character development. The exceedingly narrow opportunity to play a sport for a university or college has opened up endless doors for young African-American men. Sports are now “key social institutions in American society that are connected to the economy, education, family, and other spheres of social life” (Beamon 353). It is evident that sport brings communities together, but division remains as issues regarding racial inequalities and basic human rights have yet to subside in this ever-evolving country.

Economic Exploitation

In the financial sense, collegiate athletes do not receive any monetary payments from the NCAA or the universities themselves for their efforts in playing ball, despite the fact they generate revenue for the schools and NCAA. This is part of the economic exploitation that is occurring. In the cases of teams at Power Five schools such as Texas, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, and Penn State, 40 to 80 million dollars in profit is seen each year, even once coaches are paid their multimillion-dollar salaries (Lowe 28). Since football and men's basketball are recognized as the major-revenue producing sport programs of these academic institutions, it can be stated that the student athletes participating are taken advantage of to a greater extent. In fact, according to The Antitrust Bulletin, in Division 1 programs, the only sports to have positive net revenue are football and basketball, which means these teams are responsible for financially supporting the other teams on campus, in which White athletes predominantly participate in (Tatos and Singer 407). African-American athletes are expected to support the White athletes. The athletes on the rosters of the team sports, football and basketball, simply serve as a marketing tool because the more successful an institution is on the field or court, the more donations they will receive whether it may be from alumni or corporations.

Student enrollment is guaranteed to increase if the athletic programs are successful because attending sporting events is an appealing aspect to the college experience for the majority of students (Lowe 29). This furthers the argument of the exploitation particularly of the Black student athletes. It is true that it takes incredibly large sums of money to efficiently and effectively run an organization as complex as these multi-million dollar generating sports programs, but to not provide compensation to those who put in the work, day in and day out, is impalpable. According to a research study conducted by Drexel University and the College

Athlete Players Association, “During the years 2011-2012 the annual fair market values of a Division I basketball and football player during those years were \$239,031 and \$137,357, respectively.” This same study provided the information that average annual tuition for these student-athletes was \$23,204 (Lowe 42). While this statistic looks at D1 basketball and football players regardless of race, when looking at African Americans specifically in these sports, it can be seen how bad this exploitation really is for this demographic as they make up the majority of participants in both of these sports. The exploitation is not intended to target African Americans, but statistically speaking, it is worse for them. Looking at this evidence, athletes are clearly not getting as much financially as they are putting in or acclaimed to be worth, thus the argument of the existence of exploitation is present and valid.

The NCAA is behind how these sport programs, particularly the major-revenue producing sports known to be football and men’s basketball, collect revenue without giving the student athletes opportunities or compensation equal to the amount of what these universities have gained from having them on their campuses. When studying Division I programs, football and men’s basketball are the only sports that have positive net revenues each season. In the journal article “Deviant Exploitation of Black Male Student Athletes on White Campuses” from HeinOnline, it is stated that economic exploitation happens when the Black student athletes at these universities are not provided with a proper education, despite dedicating themselves to the athletic programs, producing large amounts of revenue (Murty and Roebuck 433). As a result of this overrepresentation of African-American men in the two major revenue-generating sport programs, if 100 percent of these athletes earned a degree over a 40 year span, the economic value of those degrees would only amount to five percent of the value of their athletic contribution as it has been estimated that these student athletes have earned over a quarter of a

trillion dollars in this time (Beamon 353). This shows that these athletes, regardless of race are not receiving an education of equal value to their sporting efforts.

One of the largest sources of income for collegiate sports organizations are the television deals and contracts they sign. In American economy there is an extremely high demand for college football to be broadcast on Saturdays and this is apparent from the money that schools make from television deals alone. According to *The Athletic*, a sports news website, by 2029 both the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and Big Ten will be giving their universities 100 million dollars annually (Auerbach). This is great for these institutions to develop and improve their facilities, but the athletes will not physically receive any of this money.

Michael Jordan, who had a quite successful 15-year career in the NBA, making millions of dollars, is a prime example of how sports pumps great sums of money into the economy. Jordan is a “commodified African American body” who can be accredited for single-handedly injecting \$10 billion into the US economy by the time of his second year of retirement in 1998 (Agyemang and Singer 13). He is claimed to be one of the greatest basketball players of all time and serves as a role model for boys and girls aspiring to be great athletes themselves, may be an extreme example of how the economy benefits from athletes, but this trend is common on even smaller scales. At a lesser extent, the same is occurring between college athletics and the economy, yet from an economic or financial standpoint, the athletes receive next to nothing for their efforts.

Academic Exploitation

Despite the benefits to competing in sport at the collegiate level, particularly, the fact that they are expected to leave with at least an undergraduate degree, there are many drawbacks in which take a toll on their academic careers. Academic exploitation occurs as well due to the idea

that universities prioritize exploiting the athletic talent of African American men over nurturing their academic potential (Simiyu). This higher-level education is intended to help students once their school days are over, but the rigorous schedule of a collegiate athlete creates both physical and mental exhaustion, in turn impacting their academic achievements, mostly in a negative way. Despite receiving an education while playing their sport, it is often substandard. It is simply a consumer benefit so that the NCAA can justify the ways in which it monetizes the labor of these athletes, while the athletes themselves are unable to (Tatos and Singer 398).

Although these collegiate players are referred to as “student athletes,” implying that academics comes first, often this is not the reality. With how much emphasis these universities, especially within the football and basketball programs, place on athletic performance and success, athletics is the clear priority. In fact, the term “student athletes” came into common dialect in the 1950s, first used by Walter Byers, the first executive director of the NCAA. In order to combat many compensation insurance claims, particularly arising out of football injuries, the NCAA needed a way to express to the courts that these athletes were not employees of the university, thus referring to them as student athletes. This term provided the balance between the potential of one’s athletic obligations being undermined while making it clear that they are not professionals. Student athletes, in short, are high-performance athletes who are forgiven for not meeting the same academic standards as their peers and do not need to be compensated for anything more than the cost of their education during their time in college (Solomon). Serving as an athlete first for these institutions, academics is placed on the back burner.

Many student athletes enter into undergraduate programs that are considered “easy” and do not take academics seriously. In the journal article “‘Used Goods’: Former African American

College Student-Athletes' Perception of Exploitation by Division I Universities," one of the former football players interviewed commented on the importance placed on academics while he was a student athlete. He claimed that coaches enforced their players to go to class and get good grades, but solely because if they do not meet the NCAA academic requirement of upholding a 2.3 GPA, then they will not be able to compete on the field (Beamon 358). While this academic requirement is in place to encourage athletes to maintain grades good enough to show a focus on their classes, over the years the NCAA has modified mandates and policies to aid those star athletes who may struggle more in academia than their peers or teammates. According to Oxford Languages, academia encompasses research, education, and scholarship, as it is the pursuit of all three of these elements. It has become known that many athletes do not truly pursue academia, especially those who would not be in college if it were not for their sport.

Student athletes in general also tend to be more limited in what courses they can choose as there must be limited conflicts with practices. Majors such as chemistry or biology, which may have required labs in the afternoon, then are not plausible, thus steering athletes away from them. This can impact their lives after the completion of their collegiate careers as they may not be as prepared as their fellow non-athlete classmates. While Black athletes may graduate at a lower rate than their White counterparts, African-American student athletes do graduate at a higher percentage than the non-athlete African-American students. Athletics causes them to be more motivated to complete college and receive a degree. To highlight another positive amongst the egregious exploitation, many Black student-athletes admitted that if it were not for their athletic scholarships and the opportunity to attend college, they would not have been able to do so, thus stunting their academic and career development even more so (Beamon 362). For some of these young men, their sport was the only path they could have taken to make it to this high

level of academia. Once a college student, some universities do not care enough to push them to graduate as they just want them for the years they can be on the field or on the court. The exploitation associated with the academic aspect of their lives is one passageway in which these African-American collegiate student athletes are underdeveloped.

Underachievement in not only academics, but occupation is evident. Athletes are forced to focus almost entirely on their sport, which hinders what they may achieve in other areas of their lives. Career, as stated before, is one of the major areas in which student athletes may struggle to succeed in, due to the lack of development of skills or experience needed in whatever field.

Sliding scales of eligibility have been implemented to accommodate for student athletes with lower grade point averages or ACT or SAT scores (Lomax 21). Colleges look at high school transcripts and standardized test scores to admit new students. Universities follow these requirements to determine who they may accept each semester, but when it comes to athletes, sometimes exceptions are made. This only feeds into the academic exploitation because they are aware, even while in high school, that their athletic ability is appraised at a higher rate than their abilities and skills when it comes to the classroom. With this knowledge, a five-star high school recruit may not focus on his courses as much as he should because certain universities will do anything to lock in a recruit even if by the institutions' standards, he may not be a top prospect for a new student. It is evident that while academics are deemed important, athletics are the priority. In fact, in recent years, the University of North Carolina had been exposed for creating fake courses in which athletes could enroll in to maintain or gain academic eligibility.

Ultimately, North Carolina escaped punishment because these classes were open to all students and in the 18 years this scandal went on, only 47.4% of the 3,100 students enrolled in them were

athletes (Solomon). The principle of the matter is that these prestigious institutions do not place enough emphasis on academics and preparing the future generation to integrate into the workforce.

Developmental Exploitation

A third type of exploitation that occurs has to do with the underdevelopment of these athletes. Not being prepared to enter a career, or to adjust to life beyond school, is to thank for issues regarding their development as men and professionals. As stated by McKenna Walsh of the Creighton Law Review, studies of athletes' brains show that they have higher mental processing and learning abilities than those of the general public. It was also found that exercise keeps one's brain sharp by improving memory and creating new brain cells (Walsh 100). This proves their minds are capable of doing significant things, but the excess pressures and demands of college sport, along with the academic limitations many face, inhibits them from developing into their full potential. While this applies to contexts outside of sport, unfortunately many athletes do not allow themselves to use their brain power in this manner, as much research points to the underdevelopment of student athletes because universities failed them in this way. This type of exploitation of Black student athletes leads to a phenomenon referred to as the "Triple Tragedy," which will be discussed at length in following sections.

While the comparison of student athletes to slaves of the NCAA or their individual sport institutions, is very common, the term "indentured servant" may be a more accurate description. Once a player commits to or receives a scholarship from a college or university, they are stuck until they transfer or graduate. When one looks at the dictionary definition of "indentured servant" it becomes clear that this is exactly how the collegiate model of sport works. Merriam-Webster states that an indentured servant is "a person who signs and is bound by indentures to

work for another for a specified time especially in return for payment of travel expenses and maintenance.” This perfectly aligns with the way in which college athletics runs. National Signing Day for 2023 is February 1st, which is when high schoolers will sign their National Letter of Intent, thus publicly expressing their commitment to a college for their sport. It is from this moment, their days of being an “indentured servant” begin. They will work long hours practicing and playing in games, while getting an education, room and board, and travel paid for, without receiving any money they can put to their names.

African Americans, particularly, are capitalized on in this industry and it is becoming quite evident to the general public the ways in which exploitation is taking place. Due to deeply rooted racial stereotypes, the fact that African Americans make up the majority in both football and basketball, and that these two sports are considered to be major-revenue producing sports, the exploitation of these young men has exponentially become a problem within these highly respected academic institutions.

While African Americans have been integrated into the sports realm over the past century, the racial issues have not diminished. There certainly is a sense of togetherness in sport, particularly in team sport, as people of many different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds come together as one to achieve a specified goal. From the outside looking in, it may appear as though the problems regarding race have dissolved, and everyone gets along. Tony N. Brown in his journal article, “There’s No Race on the Playing Field” articulates it in this fashion: “It is interesting that the contemporary sports arena or ‘playing field’ is perceived by many to be a sociological space where athletes of different races are freed from the constraints of racial conflict and division.” While this perception may be quite common, it is inaccurate because racial inequalities continue to prevail in our society, despite the façade that the sports world is

somehow prone to this. Even in the use of the terminology “sports world,” it is implied that athletes operate in an isolated world, or space apart from what is viewed as normal society, so it makes sense that racial issues and stereotypes would diminish. Becoming an athlete, at both the collegiate and professional levels, is a lifelong dream for many young children in America, so the athletes that do make it to the “big leagues” are placed on a pedestal. Society is encouraged to believe that because they have succeeded in this way, no matter their background, all their struggles are suddenly gone and they live the perfect life, in a perfect world.

Amateurism Rule

Established in 1992, the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act aimed to create a precedent that while playing for academic institutions, the athletes are to be considered amateurs. The main reasons for implementing this law were to “promote and coordinate amateur athletic activity in the United States, to recognize certain rights for United States amateur athletes, to provide for the resolution of disputes involving national governing bodies” (Public Law 95-606). Created with good intent, this act would become the reason student athletes face immense economic exploitation. Delon B. Lowe puts it in these words in his own graduate thesis: “The ‘student-athlete,’ the human production element that keeps the NCAA marketable, sees everyone else benefiting from their work, but because of a stipulation that was established by the governing body of the NCAA, which labels them ‘amateurs,’ they cannot accept so much as a cheeseburger from anyone not a family member” (Lowe 38). Despite being treated as amateurs, the time put in throughout the season and off-season is far from that of the amateur level. More so an issue with Division I programs, the school aspect that comes along with being a student athlete can be viewed as a façade. The real reason for a student athletes’ occupancy at a school is to play sports and bring in funding for the university (Walsh 80). Amateurs are to be

unpaid regardless of how much money they may bring in or provide to these institutions by their own doing. This is changing, however, as the Name, Image and Likeness, herein after referred to as “NIL,” deals are being established and legalized. With the new allowances of student athletes receiving payment, the integrity of the game will not be hurt because outside entities, not the NCAA or schools, are going to be the ones to pay these athletes. Student athletes will still be considered amateurs if they have NIL contracts because they are not being “paid for their ability to play a sport but rather for the public image that they cultivate” (Carlsbad 1). NIL deals and paying athletes at the college level will be discussed in much further detail in a future section. Ironically, the NCAA claims to be a nonprofit organization, despite the fact that the universities’ athletic programs bring in billions of dollars annually, none of which these student athletes see. In 2021 alone, the NCAA made 1.15 billion dollars in profit (ESPN). Between the years 2005 and 2019, Black athletes lost out on 17.3 to 21.5 billion dollars of wages (Tatos and Singer 420). Between television contracts, ticket sales, and alumni donations, to name a few, there are multitudes of channels of revenue in which the NCAA and the institutions involved can make money. It is unlikely that the sole purpose of the establishment of this rule was to prevent student athletes from being paid so that universities gain full income off their labor, but when looking at how the NCAA operates as a multibillion-dollar business, it is often perceived in this way.

One-and-Done Rule

Similar to Amateurism in the NCAA, the One-and-Done Rule is another policy that has been put into place, initially with good intent, but which has resulted in increased revenue for the NCAA organization itself, as well as each individual collegiate institution. This rule requires that the athlete must be at least 19 years of age, in addition to being a year removed from high school. Level of maturity played a major role in the purpose behind the creation of this law. High school

and professional ball are drastically different, and it takes this higher level of maturity to be physically and mentally prepared to compete professionally. While this collective bargaining agreement may not be of malicious design, it has certainly paved the way to allow exploitation to occur much more easily and at a higher rate. Because of this ruling, colleges have gained much revenue due to the age restriction implemented by the NBA as it guarantees at least one year in which universities can market and profit off of these young athletes who already may have the skills and talent to play professionally (Lowe 44). The former college athletes who now play in the NBA, faced exploitation. Sold the idea of the “college experience” and receiving essentially free education, these men were forced into college athletics. This way, the NCAA is able to market the basketball players for at least a year, primarily serving the White constituencies who benefit from the labor of these athletes (Tatos and Singer 420). Instead of signing rookie contracts, these young men must first play for an institution where they will not collect any paychecks for their efforts or athletic talent and ability. Even though the NBA organization instituted this policy, the NCAA benefits from it immensely. After reviewing the NCAA’s involvement in the exploitation of these student athletes, it is plausible to assume they must have had a say in the establishment of this rule.

These legislations are based around limitations of student athletes’ success. Their lives both within their sport and outside of it are affected. It appears that the higher-ups of these sport organizations want to exert their power by controlling parts of these young men’s lives. The need to control other groups of people who are deemed to be lesser was briefly discussed within the context of fearing Black men because they are Black, but correlates here as well. It should not go as far to say the people within the NCAA and universities fear these student athletes, but controlling them is simply part of the exploitation that occurs.

This regulation is connected to the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act in that it forces high school basketball players to remain at the amateur status for at least another year, in which they cannot receive any compensation for the high level skills they possess that others are able to profit off of. It has been stated that “This restriction is thus an unnecessary restraint on the freedom of athletes to choose to work for a salary instead of being an amateur (Carlsbad 2). Especially with all the stories about how so many athletes have come from nothing, growing up in poverty or without much, it makes no sense to continue to let them struggle when it is clear they possess the talent necessary to compete at the professional level.

While not particularly targeted at African Americans, this does go back to the concept that there is an instilled fear in White men that the African-American race has the capabilities to overpower them, thus causing them to feel the need to oppress and impose limits in order to prevent this at all costs. Exploitation is a big issue in football and men’s basketball, which are dominated by Black men in the modern era of sport. While this is the case, the issue of exploitation is looked over because in a sense, it has become legalized by rulings such as Amateurism and One-And-Done. The impacts of the ongoing exploitation go beyond the domain of American college campuses. It affects the character and cultural development of the entire community of young Black men in the United States.

Centrality of Athletic and Racial Identity

Distinguished character traits or personality is what makes up a person’s identity, according to *Merriam-Webster*. To add to this dictionary definition of the word “identity,” the *Berkeley Well-Being Institute* defines identity as “a person’s sense of self, established by their unique characteristics, affiliations, and social roles.” This concept also contains a component of continuity as a person may feel as though they are the same, even though changes may have

occurred to their lives or circumstances (Yilmaz). This being said, everyone identifies with or as something, whether it be male or female, athlete or musician, White or Black. Having an identity is integral to discovering and truly knowing oneself. If a person cannot identify themselves as anything or feel as though they belong to a group, they may struggle finding their purpose in life or end up lost or with a feeling of emptiness. American society has become so obsessed with the idea of being associated with an identity that it becomes the thing that consumes their mind and lifestyle. It is at this point, that this mentality becomes negative, taking over every aspect of their lives.

This overarching idea of self-concept, which encompasses how one perceives themselves, whether in a physical, emotional, social, or spiritual context, begins at a young age. This is especially prevalent in the African-American community in which millions of young boys are encouraged to rely on their athletic abilities, viewing the lifestyle of fame and riches in the sport world as the only way they will achieve success in the future. Constantly being reminded of the gift of their supposed genetic advantage in this area, only discourages young African Americans from pursuing other potential fields which can provide success and stability. According to research from Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, "66% of African-American boys between the ages of 13 and 18 believed they were capable of supporting themselves as professional athletes" (Hoberman 52). This is such an unhealthy and dangerous mindset because although possible, in the bluntest of terms, it most likely will not pan out in their favor. Very few make it to this level as approximately 1% of the athletes in college will get the opportunity to play professionally (Beamon).

Black youth, particularly the boys, are heavily influenced to think in this fashion because of the influence of their community, the media, and most prominent role models exhibit and

encourage this mentality. These young boys want to be just like the successful men who look like them, and the media constantly pushes the athlete lifestyle. Athletes are all over television and other media platforms, so these children latch onto the perception that becoming an athlete is the only path for people like them. These children grow up with a strong central athletic identity, which refers to the “degree to which an individual identifies with the role of an athlete” (Bimper and Harrison 277). This sense of identity only grows if they make it to the collegiate level, where their social status and success is determined by athletic performance. While there are more African Americans than any other race who represent professional football and basketball players, this is still a highly unrealistic goal for these children because just over 7% of high school athletes will put on a collegiate uniform, with less than 2% (or 1 in 57) will play at a NCAA Division I school. About 1% of collegiate athletes get the opportunity to play at the professional level and even then, their career lasts only around three and a half years on average (Beamon). So many base their lives around something that will never come to fruition, limiting themselves in other areas of potential successes, thus resulting in identity foreclosure. This issue refers to when one commits to a particular identity before they have explored other options. They have not partaken in exploratory behaviors, such as career exploration, talent development, or becoming involved in social clubs or interest groups (Beamon). Athletes tend to stick with athletes, desiring to stay within this clique which has become a comfort zone for them. This is why so many African-American athletes struggle post-graduation. All their lives they have worked towards one goal, limiting themselves from reaching their full potential.

Sure, a handful will indeed make it to the highest level in sport. Even then, it is difficult to sustain a successful career. Few go on to greatly impact the game or become the next Michael Jordan. Unfortunately, the probability of this occurring is extremely low and society does not

emphasize this enough within the African-American community. Identification with being an athlete and chasing this title their entire lives, without focusing on other components of life, such as being a son, brother, father, etc. leads to issues in the future. A major issue being their integration into society. Society and the media fail to show this group of people that being an athlete is not the only way to make it. External forces cannot be blamed exclusively for the character development of these young men as more often than not, this push towards sport occurs within the home, whether due to cultural reasons or economic status.

As stated before, this mindset is dangerous. It can have serious negative impacts on an athlete's mental health as they are forced to move on from sports and beyond their role as an athlete, which they had spent their whole life preparing for (Bimper and Harrison). It is hard to process practically having one's identity taken away. It certainly takes a toll on one's mental health as they go through this identity crisis at a ripe age of about 22 or 23, struggling to find themselves again. Injuries can also be detrimental to an athlete's mental health as during the time they have to step away from their sport to rehab, they may feel as though they have nothing now since they physically cannot be active in their sport. In fact, professional basketball player, John Wall, currently with the Los Angeles Clippers, recently admitted that when he was dealing with an injury to his Achilles tendon, and personal family matters, he contemplated suicide (Archie). This often is a taboo topic, not only for athletes, but so many struggle with it and never open up about it or seek help because society equates athletes with being strong and tough. This image has been ingrained into the minds of athletes over their years of training and competitions. It becomes difficult to admit when they do not feel as though they can meet these expectations due to physical or mental battles.

This is a major issue in college athletics because suicide is the second leading cause of college students, followed by accidental injuries. This has been an issue for decades, and it is only getting worse. From 1999 to 2014 there was a population-wide increase of 24 percent in the United States (Dodd et al.). A more recent statistic shows that from 2020 to 2021 there was an increase of 13.5 suicides per 100,000 to 14.2, with the largest increase being 8 percent for males within the age range of 15-24, which encompasses the demographic of male collegiate athletes (“Suicide Increases in 2021”). The Covid-19 Pandemic is a major cause for this increase after there had been a couple years in which suicide rates were declining. Despite the pandemic affecting the mental health of millions of people, athletes for years have been struggling with their mental health, as stated before, and this has shown up in research.

Involvement in sport has been proven to increase one’s social connectedness and self-esteem, factors which are thought to decrease suicidal thoughts and actions, but it has been found that sport participation can increase risk of suicide, especially among collegiate student athletes (Dodd et al.). Not only must they deal with the pressures and heavy load of schoolwork and classes, but also the pressures to perform at a high level in their physically and mentally exhausting sport. Playing a sport increases one’s capability for suicide, which is the final factor that must be overcome in order for a lethal suicide attempt to occur, according to the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide. The first two factors are perceived burdensomeness and lack of feelings of mutually supportive relationships. Going back to the capability of suicide, which is found to be quite present in athletes, this factor combines high pain tolerance and fearlessness about death (Dodd et al.) Athletes face higher levels of physical exhaustion than is considered normal, which leads to fatigue and discomfort or pain. They also repeatedly injure themselves and are often told to deal with the pain to continue training or being

forced to play through it, thus building a tolerance for pain. Combined with research that predicts that athletes have a higher fearlessness for death, collegiate athletes are at high risk for suicidal tendencies. Although true, people remain silent on this concerning issue. Universities and other outlets do not provide these athletes with the proper resources to aid their mental health.

African-American student athletes struggle with both athletic and racial identity due to the pressures placed upon them by society. Oftentimes, the public views them exclusively as athletes, having no other purpose to serve besides entertainment for fans and money makers for the NCAA and the collegiate institutions associated with it. This over-identification with being an athlete starts from a young age but is at its peak during their endeavor as a college athlete in the United States. The spotlight and pressure are on them to perform at high levels in order to win games and championships, thus bringing in, millions of dollars to the NCAA and their academic institutions. While in the spotlight there is much focus on the fact that these athletes are African American. The media, fans, and even teammates, constantly point out this factor, focusing immensely on the skin color and how that makes them so successful in the sport world. Not only does this lead to enormous amounts of exploitation, especially for those student athletes who are Black, but “over-identification with athletes and the world of physical performance limits the development of black children by discouraging academic achievement in favor of physical self-expression” (Hoberman 50). It is not that associating with an athlete is an entirely negative thing, but when it becomes the only thing they identify with. Labeling them as student athletes shows that being a student is a priority, yet it does not end up or appear to be this way, especially at powerhouse schools, where football and basketball seem to trump any activity or program. When football and basketball players are placed on pedestals, it becomes difficult for these young men to focus on any other aspect of life. The accolades now limit them in their

future endeavors. Outside forces continue to look at these young African-American men simply as marketable resources called athletes. When others have a specific perception of a person or group, it is hard to shake that common belief, especially when they hold so little control over their own lives.

The mindset of identifying solely as a Black athlete, leads to what is referred to as the “Triple Tragedy,” which describes the areas in which young African American men are underdeveloped due to the centrality of athletic and racial identity that is seen so vividly in the modern, exploitative football and basketball program across the United States.

Triple Tragedy

Participation in collegiate sport, especially Division I football and men’s basketball can lead to severe underdevelopment of young men in multiple different facets of their lives. The focus remains on African-American boys and men because they are the demographic most impacted in the long run. The immense exploitation they face is not limited to their time in college as it fosters in their lives starting at a young age and affects them post-graduation. There is much evidence to make these claims, thus a “triple tragedy” exists within these athletes’ lives. This concept encompasses what really is going on for these young men, mentally and physically, putting into words how Black men in sports are being exploited. This is not a new concept, as Dr. Harry Edwards, a professor of Sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, wrote on this subject over 30 years ago, in 1988. Sport and the NCAA has evolved greatly since this time, yet African Americans face the same problems. Edwards spoke on the exploitation of Black athletes and warned them of the dangers which come along with the sole preparation of a career in sport (Edwards 138). Funneling their talents into one career option causes underdevelopment in not only themselves, but Black society as a whole, as they pull that

potential talent from other fields. By all means, great success can be found within the sport arena but many liabilities and tragedies come along with the pressures within the African-American home and culture in trying to succeed and be great in this area.

This phenomenon consists of three cataclysms, each of which will be explained and analyzed within the context of football and men's basketball players. The three areas are as follows: the obsessive pursuit of sport goals; personal and cultural underdevelopment; and cultural and institutional underdevelopment.

Obsessive Pursuit of Sport Goals

It has become a common generalization that African-American men have been gifted with incredible athletic talent. While there is no argument denying this assumption, the issue is that it has become an obsession. This is what the first part of what the triple tragedy concept aims to discuss.

Many young Black men have been stereotyped for decades, essentially being forced to participate in sports because of the presumptuous belief that sport alone will garner them potential fame and riches in the future. An overwhelming amount never even make it to the collegiate level, even fewer making it professionally, yet there is such a strong push towards the exclusive pursuit of sport in the Black community. Participation in sport for any child, regardless of race or gender, is important for their health and development as found by various studies. Sport also acts as a protective factor for these children as it can provide a safe place for them and keep them out of trouble, especially if they take it seriously. Many lessons are to be learned through involvement in sport whether it may be team or individual, but it must be understood that this participation does not have to evolve into the obsession or preoccupation, that it oftentimes does, particularly among the Black youth (Lomax 21). The view that many people of

the White race believe that African Americans have a better chance at succeeding in a career in sport than any other professional field has become a widespread generalization, acting as a driving force in African Americans' choice to pursue sport exclusively. While the stereotype spread that they are physically or genetically more athletic than their White peers, another stereotype claims them to be intellectually deficient (Simiyu). This negative and misinformed categorization steers African-American boys away from a pursuit of education and accomplishing goals outside of sport because from a young age they have been discouraged to develop skills and talents not pertaining to sport. They may believe it is their "biological and cultural destiny to excel in playing certain sports" (Simiyu). While expected high performance in sport may be a positive stereotype regarding people of color, it causes generation after generation to neglect other areas they may find success in, because of a desire to follow the path of pursuing athletics, where excelling in school may not be necessary. Often coming from areas which lack quality resources in the school system, education is not emphasized as a priority enough. Systematically channeling this group toward sport becomes detrimental as these young men are underdeveloped by the time they finish high school or even college. The worst part of this is that millions of young men are set up for failure from an early age. Rather than pushing children toward sport, awareness needs to be raised so that the reality of potential success in sport is known.

Personal and Cultural Underdevelopment

While the first tragedy of this concept explains the obsession of sport participation with the end goal of playing at the professional level, the next two tragedies deal with underdevelopment that spawns from this unhealthy obsession. First, personal and cultural

underdevelopment will be discussed. Black collegiate student athletes, particularly in football and basketball, are exploited to the point where it impacts them in ways outside of sport.

As it can be assumed, there is much impact to one's personal life when involved in sport, especially when it represents their entire identity. Regarding the athletes playing at the university level, the reason they are at whatever academic institution it may be, they are there to play sports with the hopes of bringing wins and money to the establishment.

As previously stated, this impacts these young men from a young age as "dreams of athletic stardom have induced many African-American children to reject educational opportunities" (Hoberman 50). By not prioritizing and being taught the importance of education, they will struggle to adapt to the world beyond sports. The percentage of collegiate athletes who make it to the professional level stands at around one percent (Beamon). This is not discussed enough within the African-American community and it has and will continue to impact society.

Universities provide the highest level of education and seem to be failing their student athletes by allowing athletics to continue to take over their lives when they need to be preparing for their careers after sport. Collegiate athletes have delayed career development, low levels of career maturity, and a stunted ability to make career decisions, which involves choosing a major and occupation they wish to pursue (Beamon). Ironically, these academic institutions are more focused on profiting off their football and basketball players for the sake of their own pockets, rather than educating and preparing the future workforce.

Not only are these athletes simply not getting the value of education they deserve, but this strong push towards pursuit of sport hinders social and cognitive growth of these youth (Beamon 352). Athletes on campuses often are separated from the other students, forcing them to keep their social circles small, inhibiting their abilities to develop in this way. Cognitive growth has to

do with the ability to think and reason, which athletes may struggle with because for years they were succumbed into the sport world. Although studies show sport is beneficial to brain development, they need the opportunity for healthy development to occur. Just because they have the capability does not mean that healthy and strong development will happen, especially with such a strong obsession to pursue sport.

This becomes a cultural problem because it is so widespread for this demographic. Sport has become so integrated into African American culture, that this is now the norm, despite the fact that underdevelopment in different areas is known to occur.

Cultural and Institutional Underdevelopment

The third aspect of the triple tragedy is in alignment with underdevelopment within African American culture and institutions since sport is a focal point in many African-American households. This occurs in some parts of society as a “consequence of the drain in talent potential toward sports and away from other vital areas of occupational and career emphasis such as medicine, law, economics, politics, education and technical fields” (Simiyu). There is a noticeable lack of role models for the Black youth who are doctors, lawyers, etc. The emphasis and glorification of African-American male athletes, takes away the focus from other fields. The culture is less represented in these other careers, impacting them long-term.

The social reproduction theory explains how institutions aim to reproduce dominant ideologies and maintain the division of labor. This is seen through universities as they “reproduce students with social inequalities” by “aiding, catering, and nurturing the student’s athletic role to the detriment of his or her true academic success and occupational development” (Beamon 354). Black men play the role of the athlete, but do not make it to the positions of athletic directors, coaches, owners, or managers because it would mess up the current

stratification and dynamic of the workforce. This explains the institutional underdevelopment which is occurring due to the strong identification with athletes and sport within the African-American community.

NCAA Name Image Likeness Rule

One of the major recent arguments that has arisen within the sport community is whether to allow for collegiate athletes to get paid for their labor. Of course, this debate has continued for decades, but within the past few years, action is being taken with the introduction of NIL (name, image, likeness) deals in which student athletes can receive compensation. They profit off their name, image, and likeness, or public perception, rather than their talent on the field or court. In other words, student athletes are “marketing their persona rather than selling the actual playing of the sport” (Walsh 82). The money earned is neither coming from the school nor going to them.

Social media has been a leading factor in encouraging the NCAA and affiliated institutions to allow athletes to receive financial benefits outside of scholarships. With the growth of social media platforms and increased use, “influencers” have emerged. An influencer belongs to a particular niche or industry who has influential power over buying habits and quantifiable actions of a target audience. Student athletes, especially at bigger programs gain a social media following from fans of the team. Businesses notice this and take advantage of this marketing tool. Since there is no affiliation with the university, there is no reason as to why athletes should be prohibited from earning money. Jimmy Sotos, Ohio State basketball player, is a prime example of this as he has profited off of his personality and social media accounts alone. Posting basketball and dance videos on popular social media site, TikTok, Sotos made approximately 360,000 dollars in 2021, making his current net worth over a million dollars

(“Jimmy Sotos Net Worth”). Since the money has nothing to do with his sport performance, it would be unfair for the university to deny him of the opportunities he has now received. The rest of the students enrolled in universities across the country are allowed and even expected to work while in school, but athletes, even if they could find the time, have been limited in this area before.

There is still much debate over this topic because for decades collegiate athletes have been considered amateurs, which means that they do not get paid to compete. Because of this argument, the NCAA got involved and provided two recommendations for rules concerning amateurs profiting off NIL deals. The first recommendation deals with third-party endorsements, which now is allowed as long as this is the only way in which student athletes sign these deals. According to the NCAA they can “receive compensation for the use of their NIL in third-party endorsements or social media influencer activity, including certain activity or endorsements that may be related in some way to athletics” (Misey and Misey 2). Student athlete work product is the next category the NCAA addressed in changes regarding athlete compensation. It reiterates that the athlete is not to receive payment from schools or conferences. This being said, they can profit from work product or business activities. This incorporates social media content, promotion of a student athlete’s own business, and personal promotion activities (Misey and Misey 3). Although these changes are logical and clearly benefit the athlete, as with any issue both the positive and negative impacts must be analyzed.

From the perspective of the athlete, allowing the space for NIL deals has benefited them immensely already. Student athletes are signing deals and making money they had been prohibited from doing previously. Since so few make it to the professional level or make it in the coaching world, NIL deals may be the only way they can monetize their skills within sports. An

example of this is the NIL deal Grambling State University signed with ATHLYT near the beginning of 2022. ATHLYT serves as an NIL marketing technology platform and they signed a contract with this university where over 300 student athletes will be represented in an advertisement on a billboard in Times Square in New York in affiliation with HBCU (Historically Black college or university) League Pass+, a sport network that focuses on HBCU athletics (ATHLYT NIL Deal with Grambling). Each student athlete will be presented individually and will profit off this advertisement. Providing an opportunity for these athletes to receive compensation in this way is the first step in encouraging these athletes that making it to the “big leagues” is not the only path they can follow to find success, thus possibly exploring other career options.

While NIL deals do benefit some student athletes, mostly at larger schools, there are downsides to opening this avenue of business within collegiate sport. The NCAA was established to ensure high academic integrity is maintained, so this shift in focus to athletes profiting off their NIL will bring a disconnect between college athletes and higher education while diminishing the academic institutions themselves (Walsh 100). This further encourages student athletes to prioritize their sport over education. For the millions of young boys in the Black community, they now see that if they can just make it to the college level, they can make money to support themselves and their families. While the chances of playing in college is still relatively low, it is much more likely to occur than reaching the pros, thus further justifying this false sense of hope. Since it appears much easier to just play in college and profit off their persona, the percentage of boys who believe they will be able to support themselves as athletes will increase as they continue to disregard the importance of education.

From the perspective of the universities, NIL deals will completely change the recruiting aspect of sport. Now, when deciding where to commit, a recruit is going to factor in whether or not they will have the chance to profit off their NIL. If schools in some states can allow players to sign NIL deals whereas others cannot provide this opportunity, an unfair advantage is created. Higher valued players will most likely go where they will be able to receive compensation (Walsh 98). This is a great recruiting tool for the larger schools in the 28 states which currently have passed laws regarding NIL but hurts smaller universities or those located in states that do not allow this yet. Athletes are going to be more likely to commit to a school in which they have the potential to sign an NIL deal, so they can receive compensation while playing sport at the collegiate level. This may cause manipulation in the recruiting game, impacting the livelihoods of these athletes as they are heavily influenced by the chance to profit off their NIL, rather than factoring in the campus and the education aspect which affects their future.

African Americans as Part of the Sport Workforce

Hiring of African-American Coaches and Administration or Lack Thereof

Despite the fact that the majority of those who participate in the sports football and basketball are African-American men, this domination does not translate over to the coaching sphere. Football and basketball rely so heavily on this demographic, yet the yearn for their success is halted when it comes to a career in coaching the very sports they overpower.

This issue pertaining to discrimination of coaches, particularly head coaches, is prevalent at both the collegiate and professional level. In the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) alone, there is a staggeringly low number of Black head coaches. Of the 131 teams, 12 represent this ethnicity. Over half of the athletes in college football are African American. This statistic varies depending on the conference, with the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) having 51 percent,

whereas the Southeastern Conference (SEC) contains 61 percent of Black football players. Between the two of these Power 5 conferences, 13 of the last 14 national championships has been awarded to schools within these conferences (Coaston). It remains a problem as to why the majority of the players who make up these powerhouse, championship-winning teams are Black, yet they are not being hired to fill the head coaching positions at hand. This success should translate as it is expected that coaches are former players. Research shows that playing experience indeed is a major factor in becoming a coach, as data from the University of Georgia showed that “94 percent of head coaches and 98 percent of the assistant coaches in the database were themselves college players (Bozeman & Fay 45). As expected, when assistant coaches are included, the number still does not properly represent the percentage of athletes accounted for. There are approximately 400 minority coaches, which may seem like a large sum, but this only makes up about 38 percent of all FBS coaches, still well below the ratio of people of color playing college football (Bozeman & Fay 35). This statistic shows that each coaching staff may consist of a few people of color. Since this figure accounts for all minorities, the percentage who are African American is even less.

The numbers are strikingly similar in the NFL as three out of the 32 head coaches are African American, making that 9.4 percent, whereas the percentage of FBS coaches stands at 9.2. This is even lower than the number of African Americans accounted for in the United States, which stands at 13.6 percent of the population (*US Census Bureau*). There are three African-American head coaches, but five minorities hold this title in total, which would be a whopping 15.6 percent. This still is drastically lower than the percentage of minorities who compete on the field because, according to the Center for Study of Sport in Society, 68 percent of the players are

Black (Hall 109). There is significant underrepresentation in the coaching realm in football alone.

Between Division I, II, and III schools across the United States, there are over 1000 basketball teams, compared to the 542 football teams. While this number is almost double, meaning there stands more opportunities for Black men to become head coaches, the percentage still does not reflect that of the athletes who belong to the African-American ethnicity. As of 2021, there are 110 Black head coaches out of the 358 Division I basketball programs. This only accounts for 31 percent, which is an increase, as in 2020 it stood at 27 percent. The fact that an increase occurred is positive, yet still not where it needs to be to properly represent the number of African-American players. Not only is this ratio of coaches to players skewed, the more prestigious and higher quality a program is, “the coaches get whiter and the rosters get Blacker” (Washington). Despite having more African-American athletes, White coaches continue to take the head coach position, dominating this aspect of sport.

The number of Black players in the NBA make up an even larger portion of the majority, representing over 75 percent of the league (Hall 109). While this issue regarding the underrepresentation, it is not nearly as low as that which occurs in collegiate football and the NFL, the amount of Black head coaches in the NBA is still not to the point where it accurately represents the percentage of athletes. This organization has done a much better job at hiring people of color, despite not putting any restrictions or policies into place to ensure this. Over the years, this statistic has increased. As of this upcoming season, 2022-23, the NBA season will have 15 Black head coaches, which accounts for exactly 50 percent.

Not only in the realm of coaching is there underrepresentation, but “African Americans are virtually nonexistent in positions such as athletic directors, assistant athletic directors,

compliance officers, and sports information directors” (Lomax 22). These administrative jobs are all necessary for a sport program to run smoothly and efficiently, at any level of the game. Often, African Americans are not encouraged to become athletic directors or compliance officers, but the lack of education in this area impacts the lack of their presence as well. To deny Black men and women from pursuing a career in sport by holding one of these job titles sends a message to the Black community that they are only useful and will only achieve success by participating in the sport rather than holding a management position and assisting in helping a team or program function properly. At the completion of their college careers, they are forced out of sport, essentially, in part because of the social reproduction theory, which was discussed before. Homophily is at the root of this theory, which refers to the tendency of people to associate and bond with others who are like them. Alongside homophily is the issue of homologous reproduction, which occurs in organizations when people in power only share their positions of power and influence with those who have similar characteristics to them. This is exactly what is occurring within the hiring of coaches and administrative staff in sport.

This phenomena of underrepresentation in both coaching and administrative jobs is entirely ironic because of the great influence African Americans have had on both football and basketball through their participation alone. Society expects them to remain a large part of these sports yet limits them in a way in which they are not recruited for these sport related jobs, cutting them off from the sports field once they are not useful out on the court or field any longer. There continues that sense of control that was discussed more in depth earlier. Whites in the United States very much so make up the majority of those in sport administration positions, in which major decisions are made that can impact sport as a whole. It is perfectly justifiable to allow such a high percentage of African Americans participate in two of the most popular sports in North

America, as long as they are still able to be controlled. In his article, “More Black head coaches doesn’t mean college basketball’s problem is solved”, Jesse Washington, award-winning journalist, states “It defies common sense that so many Black players have produced so few head coaches. But there’s an ugly logic in the fact that an overwhelmingly white power structure—athletic directors, presidents, trustees, regents, and the almighty donors—has mostly chosen white men to run their teams” (Washington). This explains the confusion and frustration with these statistics and can describe the issue at hand for both football and basketball programs at the collegiate and professional levels. Hiring minorities for these positions, coaching and administrative, to the point where White people are no longer the majority and in charge, shifts who holds the control in modern society. They refuse to let go of the reigns they hold over every other race and ethnic group in this country, even when it comes to sport.

Yet, it is not entirely true that African Americans simply are not given any opportunities in sports beyond being an athlete, because many factors go into who may be selected as head coach or athletic director and the statistics may not be as dismal as they seem. One theory, “The Channeling Hypothesis” provides insight and reasoning as to why the percentages of Black coaches as opposed to players is significantly lower and will be discussed in the following section. The statement that people of color cannot be successful or receive opportunities in this field would also be entirely false. One of the most notable African-American head coaches in the NFL is Tony Dungy, as he was the first African American head coach to win a Super Bowl, making history in this sport. He was with the Colts when they won Super Bowl XLI in 2007, becoming the champions for the 2006 season. His coaching tenure was successful and he paved the way for other Black men in coaching.

When filling an empty job position, no matter the field, the person most qualified and expected to be able to perform at the highest level is the candidate that should be chosen. Too often, race plays a large factor, when it is a quality that does not affect one's capabilities to accomplish and execute the job at hand. Skin color has nothing to do with task completion or being successful at a job or not.

The Channeling Hypothesis

Data and statistics provide clear evidence that minorities' opportunities have been and continue to be repressed in both administrative and coaching jobs in football and basketball at the collegiate and professional levels, particularly at the head coach position. At surface level, this can be blamed on racial inequalities, as the majority of those in front office positions are White. With them holding this power, homologous reproduction is likely to occur. This certainly is a major factor, but there is something deeper that this supposed oppression can be attributed to that must be assessed as well. This has come to be known as the Channeling Hypothesis and it is a theory which explains racial stacking and the concept of how decisions early on in an athlete's career very much so impacts their future opportunities in coaching. This ideology is based on what is called "position channeling" which refers to the concept that whichever position an athlete chooses to play has a significant influence whether or not they will be considered for a head coach job in years to come. People tend to coach the position they played as they have both the knowledge and experience. As with any job in any industry, one must move up the ranks. An athlete fresh out of college is not going to land a head coach position at the professional level for their prospective sport, no matter how good they may be. Not every reason an African-American former athlete may not get hired should or can be traced back to those in power over this process.

Of course, there is a strong case against the likelihood of a Black man becoming a head coach, more so in the sport of football than basketball.

Racial stacking occurs when different races are placed in different positions on a team. Being based off racial stereotypes, African Americans often play the positions which require less strategy and leadership qualities and more athleticism, such as receiver, running back, or defensive back. The athletes are stacked in this way, which impacts their future in coaching as coordinator and head coach positions require more tactical and leadership skills.

Position channeling explains these discrepancies more so for football coaches, because of the multiple different positions that require an individual coach, aside from the head coach spot. As stated previously, while there are about 400 minorities, which represents 38% of coaches in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), holding coaching jobs in the FBS, a miniscule amount of them have attained the highly desirable head coach status (Bozeman & Fay 34-35). The basis of this notion is that there is quantitative evidence to back up the fact that certain positions tend to be dominated by certain races. There is an overrepresentation of Whites at quarterback and African Americans at wide receiver (Bozeman & Fay 30). Evidently, this has an impact on the races in which lead to domination of particular coaching positions. As with any job, there are steps before getting to the top. This means that one's first coaching job would most likely be as a position coach. From there, they move on to become coordinators, coaching the overall offense or defense, and then the promotion to head coach is possible. This path is common, but is seen through more for White men. Particularly, those who played quarterback or linebacker tend to become coordinators, with former quarterbacks being the most plausible choice for a head coaching job. Much has to do with the strategy that goes into both playing and coaching these positions as they are each the leader on the field of their respective sides of the ball. Since

African Americans tend to fill the role of wide receivers or running backs, the chances of them moving on to be a coordinator are slim, which then dampens the likelihood that they will be promoted to head coach, because coordinator typically serves as a stepping stone to this career advancement (Bozeman et al. 31). This is not to say that former receivers or running backs are not capable of becoming offensive or defensive coordinators, to then go on and take the head coach position, but it is much less likely as they do not have the strategic mindset usually desired to be in charge of the team as a whole. To reiterate the fact that quarterbacks statistically have the best chance of getting a head coach position, many position coaches over the years have been told that their lack of experience working with quarterbacks is what holds them back from becoming offensive coordinators (Jones). This being said, some assistant coaching positions are more important than others, in the terms of career advancement (Clay 6). Experience with and as quarterbacks or linebackers boost these chances.

Although it has been made evident that work with quarterbacks is high on the prerequisites for a head coach position, Craig Johnson, former professional football coach, last coaching the running backs for the New York Giants, has never received serious consideration as a head coach. In his 36 years of coaching college and professional football he coached both quarterbacks and running backs but never became a coordinator. During his 36 years he coached six Pro Bowl quarterbacks and developed both 2003 co-NFL MVP Steve McNair and 2006 offensive rookie of the year Vince Young (Jones). While his resume is impressive, he never made it past the level of being a position coach. Johnson is an African American, but this should play no role whether or not he should advance in this career, but with his experience and lack of advancement, this factor comes into question. This may be the case for many Black men in coaching, but the question arises of whether or not those hiring are racist or if they are honestly

selecting the most qualified men that fit the environment of the franchise. With how concerned teams in the sport business are with winning, race should not be of such concern.

Johnson had years of experience coaching quarterbacks and did not become a head coach, but one of the most recognized Black coaches in the NFL, Tony Dungy started his coaching career at the University of Minnesota. He coached the defensive backs, as he was a former safety himself. Then moving up in the ranks becoming a defensive coordinator, he eventually became a head coach. This channel is not nearly as common, since Dungy did not work with quarterbacks in his career. Despite this fact, he was quite successful and served as a trailblazer for African-American men in this field. It has been said that linebackers have a good chance at becoming a head coach because of the strategy and leaderships skills that are associated with this position as well, often recognized as the quarterback of the defense. In recent years, defensive backs have also made a good run at filling head coach positions as defenses have transformed to utilizing five defensive backs at a time, rather than four. Because of this defensive back coaches have become very important to the coaching scheme and hierarchy of the defense. The African-American head coaches in the Power 5 conference who have defensive coordinator experience, which is 19 out of the 62, or 31 percent, all worked as defensive back coaches earlier in their careers (Clay 6). This shows that this path is becoming more accessible.

While the pool of African-American candidates of athletes who could become coaches in the future may be quite large, the pool of current minority coaches who may have the potential to be promoted to a head coaching job is much smaller. There are simply more White coaches in total, which explains why it is more likely for a White man to hold this position. In fact, according to a sample from 2016, there were around three times as many White assistant coaches as there were Black. The exact ratio was 641 to 221. This means that just for consideration for a

promotion, Whites were at least three times as likely to achieve a higher coaching status (Clay 6). This is not to dismiss the fact that Black men have been passed over for promotions, but it gives solid evidence which explains why the percentage of Black head coaches does not represent the number of athletes participating in football. It is not as simple to say they do not have goals of coaching, but this is part of the reason. Many feel as though they will not get a chance at a job to begin with, discouraging them from applying for jobs. They need to be educated on this matter and receive the support necessary to encourage them to pursue sport beyond participation as an athlete.

The Rooney Rule

The malpractices that are associated with the hiring process, not exclusively seen within sport, influenced the NFL to establish the Rooney Rule. Essentially, it aims to monitor and regulate the discrimination that may take place, whether intentional or not.

The higher-ups of the National Football League were the ones to implement a new rule which would impact the hiring process that takes place in order to fill coaching positions. This policy is known as the Rooney Rule, named after Dan Rooney, late Chairman for the Steelers organization. In 2003, it became a requirement for “every team with a head coaching vacancy to interview at least one or more diverse candidates before making a new hire (*The rooney rule*).

The purpose was to attempt to create more diversity among the league coaches. The establishment of this precedent provides more opportunity to the minorities who may be struggling to succeed in this field. It has also been adopted by the business sector as organizations aim to diversify, even if mostly with the intent to appeal to the public eye by meeting ethical standards.

Over 70 percent of the players in the NFL are African American, yet when it comes to coaching, they are wildly underrepresented. Currently, there are five minorities who fill the head coach position. They are as follows: Mike Tomlin with the Pittsburgh Steelers, Lovie Smith with the Houston Texans, Mike McDaniel with the Miami Dolphins, Robert Saleh with the New York Jets, and Ron Rivera with the Washington Commanders (Wilner). Three of these men belong to the African American community. As compared to the almost three quarters of the league's athletes being made up by Black men, only about 9 percent of the head coaches are. This can be blamed in part on stacking and the Channeling Hypothesis. Unfortunately, the way our society has been programmed plays a role in this phenomenon. Minorities face an unfair obstacle when it comes to moving through the ranks and that obstacle is the color of their skin. They face more limitations to advancing their careers than their White counterparts. Much of this being accredited to the formerly discussed issues that arise with underdevelopment.

College football faces the same issues regarding the presence of Black head coaches. Just over ten years ago a proposal similar to that of the Rooney Rule came about yet was never officially put into place. Dr. Richard Lapchick, human rights activist and writer, who also serves as the head of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida proposed that universities be required to interview at least one Black candidate for any head coach positions. This mirrors the Rooney Rule, but the NCAA and NFL run their organizations differently. The NCAA is unable to implement a system such as this because it maintains a non-profit, voluntary status meaning the organization cannot influence the hiring practices of its member entities (Clay 7). This policy would have been termed the "Eddie Robinson Rule" after former head football coach of 56 years for Grambling State University, an HBCU (Historically Black college or university) located in Grambling, Louisiana.

Although the Eddie Robinson Rule has yet to be accepted by the NCAA, the Rooney Rule has made a positive impact on the hiring process in the NFL. Despite the establishment of a progressive ruling such as this, Black men are still statistically underrepresented in this professional field. Being backed by evidence, many criticize this rule as a sham. Multiple minority head coach candidates have claimed they were given false interviews. A lawsuit filed against the NFL by Brian Flores, former Miami Dolphins head coach, backs up this statement (Baker). This is one of the most recent incidents and was all over the media just months ago.

Brian Flores Lawsuit

Brian Flores was the head coach for the Miami Dolphins for 3 seasons, from 2019 to 2021. The Dolphins parted ways with Flores on January 10, 2021, despite the two years remaining in his contract with the team. He left Miami with a losing record of 24-25 indicating 24 wins and 25 losses. His last two seasons he did have a winning record, but the Dolphins never made it to a playoff game under his leadership.

Upon being fired, Flores filed a lawsuit against the NFL putting into a “legal document what Black coaches have said privately for years, specifically that they receive job interest to fulfill the NFL’s Rooney Rule...and are not considered serious candidates for many openings” (Seifert). During Flores’ job search he was interviewed by the Giants after the team had decided who they were planning on hiring (Baker). They went with Brian Daboll, a White man. Flores felt as though he was not considered seriously and only given the interview because of the NFL’s requirement to interview at least one minority. Flores also came out claiming text messages between him and New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick three days before his interview with the Giants which led him to believe that that Daboll had already been chosen (Wilner).

While Daboll may have truly been the best fit for the Giants organization, Flores felt cheated out of this opportunity and disrespected as a coach and human being.

Flores has worked to prove that he has faced racial discrimination during the hiring process despite the establishment of the Rooney Rule. While Flores has had the opportunity to serve as a head coach, unlike many other Black men, he aims to expose the reality of the Rooney Rule with this lawsuit. Taking an unlikely path by being a defensive coaching assistant, Flores has been at the top of the ranks. He even placed third in the Coach of the Year voting for the 2021 season after turning the Dolphins organization around. After this success, it is difficult to face being fired and demoted. Flores is among others who view this policy as a sham as Ray Horton, former football coach mostly serving the role of defensive coordinator, accused the Tennessee Titans of giving him a fake interview in 2016. The job went to Mike Mularkey who later admitted the Titans did indeed inform him he had already gotten the job, before Horton had his interview (Seifert).

While race may have played a role, it cannot be assumed because it is possible that the Giants felt as though Flores was not the right fit for them and may have lacked the specific skill set or characteristics they were looking for.

Conclusion

Social and racial inequalities do not stop at the foot of the door to the sport world. African Americans, who have dealt with issues regarding the color of their skin for centuries, constantly are facing these problems. In sport, particularly football and basketball, much stereotyping of Black men occurs. Their success and domination in these two sports is commonly attributed to the idea that they simply are genetically advantaged, having a natural gift when it comes to physical competition. This leads to immense exploitation of those participating

in collegiate sport because people in charge allow for it to happen. The exploitation of African-American men in sport does not only apply to the economic aspect of it all, but also academic and most devastatingly, developmental. The exploitation begins from a young age, impacting how they view academics and future careers, affecting their identity and character development.

While African Americans dominate football and basketball, there remains underrepresentation within coaching and administration positions. The percentages are alarmingly low as there is a lack of African-American presence in head coach positions. Change is taking place with the help of policies, although still just a few African-American men hold head coach positions. While Black men have been integrated into the sport world, there is yet to be equal representation. A statistically equally representative coach to athlete ratio has yet to be achieved, but it is not to say it will not happen in the future.

While this issue is being brought to light and changes have been and are currently being made, there is much to do to eliminate exploitation within college athletics and to have proper representation of African Americans in the coaching realm.

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