

Professional Sports Experiences as Contested Racial Terrain

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Abstract African-American athletes have been widely represented in the sporting world throughout the twenty-first century. Sport participation has been positive for the group and for American society as a whole by both aiding integration and providing opportunities, such as college scholarships, social mobility, etc. that may not have been available in other avenues. Comprising 78 % of the National Basketball Association and 67 % of the National Football League, African-Americans males' overrepresentation as professional athletes seems to illustrate opportunities for the group unfettered by any major barriers (Lapchick 2011). However, contemporary scholars have debated whether or not sports are actually a way out of less than desirable economic and social situations for African-American males. Although most Americans, and athletes themselves, think of professional sports in terms of the fame and fortune experienced by the most successful athletes, this article examines the experiences that is perhaps most common among professional athletes through the lens of contested racial terrain.

Keywords Professional sports · Contested terrain

African-American athletes have been widely represented, highly visible, and successful in the sporting world throughout the twenty-first century. Their sport participation has had a positive impact on an individual and interpersonal level and has benefited American society by encouraging institutional integration and providing opportunities, such as college scholarships and paths of social mobility that may not have been available in other avenues. Comprising 78 % of the National Basketball Association and 67 % of the National Football League, African-Americans' overrepresentation as

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professional athletes seems to illustrate opportunities for the group unfettered by any barriers (Lapchick 2011). However, contemporary scholars have debated whether or not sports are actually a way out of less than desirable economic and social situations for African-American males. Research has shown that the overemphasis on sports among African-American males may be a deterrent that prevents the social and economic mobility of the group. From this perspective, African-American men are mesmerized by the lure of sports fame and fortune, while being distracted from other occupations that hold far greater promise for economic mobility and escalation of social status. A tragedy of sorts:

Triple tragedy.... One, the tragedy of thousands upon thousands of black youths in the obsessive pursuit of sports goals that the overwhelming majority of them will never attain. Two, the tragedy of the personal and cultural underdevelopment that afflicts so many successful and unsuccessful black sports aspirants. Three, the tragedy of cultural and institutional underdevelopment throughout black 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.

(Harrison 2000, p. 36)

The triple tragedy that Harrison alludes to is essentially an opportunity cost for both individuals and society. In comparison to their White counterparts, African-American males are socialized by family and communities into certain sports thereby limiting their exposure to other career paths and role models, and pushing sports as a promising career early in life (Beamon, 2008; Beamon and Bell 2002, 2006; Edwards 2000; Harris 1994). As the targets of much of this socialization, African-American males experience these negative effects disproportionately. Overemphasizing athletic participation during childhood and early adulthood produces lower levels of academic achievement, higher expectations for professional sports careers as a means to upward mobility and economic success, dependence on athletic identities, lower levels of career maturity, and lower levels of life satisfaction after retirement from sports (Adler and Adler 1991; Beamon 2008, 2010). The impact of popular culture's portrayal of the African-American male athlete on their behavior and life chances has been examined by scholars and social activists for decades. Many studies evaluate the effects of this image on the career aspirations, academic performance, and self-concepts of young African-American males. From this view, sports are not an institution free from prejudice and racial barriers for minorities, but are "contested terrain," providing golden opportunities while also reproducing and masking current inequalities (Hartmann 2000). Harry Edwards, a leading sport sociologist and activist, argues that the push toward athletics in African-American families hinders the social and cognitive growth of African-American youth (Edwards 2000). Exceptional athletes such as LeBron "King" James, Michael Jordan, and Emmitt Smith, are household names, but the failures of many others are unrecognized. In addition, images of successful African-American athletes abound, but there are fewer numbers of culturally visible African-American male public role models successful in business or education, which perpetuates the stereotype that African-American males are primarily or even exclusively athletically talented (Hoberman 1997). Additionally, the obsession with highly visible and successful professional athletes overshadows or even negates the most common experiences of

professional athletes. Although most Americans think of professional sports in terms of the fame and fortune experienced by the most successful athletes, such a pinnacle of financial and celebrity success is not the norm. This article examines the experiences that are more common among professional athletes through the lens of “contested terrain.”

Literature Review

Each year there are approximately 1.5 million high school students participating in athletics, 14,000 college seniors, and only 210 professional sports rookies (Meeker et al. 2000). Specifically, out of the 40,000 African-American basketball players, 35 will make the NBA and only seven will be starters (Eitzen, 2003).

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the funnel to professional sports is extremely narrow. There are around 30,015 African-American physicians and 30,800 African-American lawyers, and less than 3,500 African-American professional athletes in all sports combined (Coakley 2010). In fact, it is statistically more likely for an African-American male to become a neurosurgeon than to play in the NBA.

The story of African-American athletes portrayed by the media on an everyday basis suggests otherwise. Consequently, many continue to believe that sports are the most viable means to upward mobility for African-American males. One possible reason is the overrepresentation of African-Americans in America’s most popular and media-saturated sports, basketball and football, and the manner in which the media portray these athletes. However, there is an absence of discussion concerning the most common sporting experience of African-American males, which is deselection (not being chosen to play professionally) or the less than glamorous experience of second string, free-agent, semi-professional, practice squad, and developmental league players.

The popular view of sports, according to Hartmann (2000), is that sport is a way out of the “ghetto”; that minority or oppressed groups can use sport to achieve success. This popular view displays our society as racially integrated and harmonious. However, when examined critically, sport can serve to reproduce racial inequality; in fact, African-American athletes experience similar obstacles that racial and ethnic minorities experience in mainstream society, such as limited career advancement potential, limited access to ownership and management positions, and less rewards for equal effort (Hartmann 2000). Table 1 shows this phenomena in the NFL and the NBA in

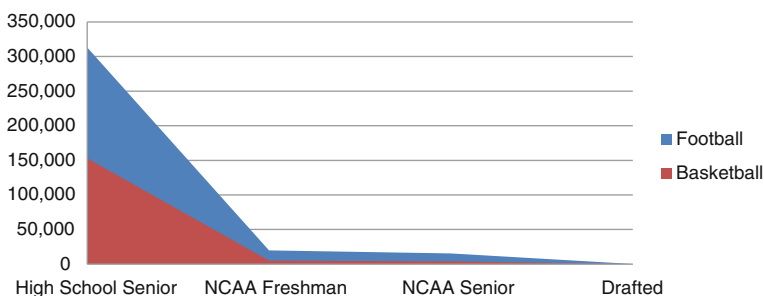


Fig. 1 Path to professional football and basketball (National Collegiate Athletic Association 2012a)

Table 1 Percentages of African-Americans in leadership positions in the NBA and NFL

Position	Percent African-American 2009–2010	
	NBA	NFL
Players	78	67
League front office	20	8.7
Majority owners	2	0
Head coaches	27	19
General managers/director of player personnel	23	16
Administration	16	10
Physicians	3	5
Trainers	16	17
Radio and T.V. announcers	18	8

Lapchick (2011)

which players are overwhelmingly African-American, but coaching, leadership and management positions are almost exclusively occupied by Whites.

In his book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, Roden (2006) suggests that African-American athletes have failed to obtain power in the sports industry or capitalize fully on athletic successes. As a consequence, many of these same athletes fail to connect with an ownership and management pattern that they perceive as exploitative. For instance, in their case study of the NFL draft, Dufur and Feinberg (2009) discussed the showcase of eligible draftees at the NFL Combine as an “auction block.” African-American respondents in the study were more likely than Whites to describe the process in terms of race and power and used slavery analogies to depict the measuring and testing athletes undergo in pursuit of securing jobs with an NFL team. Although all athletes regardless of race are subjected to the same process, minority athletes felt exploited mostly because the coaches, scouts, and general managers were most often White.

But what about athletes on the fringe of elite status? Too often, popular culture focuses on the “best of the best” and ignores those athletes who persist in sport participation after college, have been afforded professional opportunities, but don’t reach the level of “star” status? And from their perception, what role does race play in their everyday athletic experience? The current study seeks to examine these experiences from their perspective. Each athlete interviewed had self-described negative experiences with professional sports leagues, particularly as it related to their status as African-American men. Moreover, they all felt ill prepared to handle life after sports making their professional sporting experiences feel like “life or death.”

Methods

This study utilizes qualitative methods in order to better understand the experiences of current and former professional athletes and examines 14 African-American men

who played varying levels and types of professional sports. The 14 respondents were a part of a larger sample of 20 former Division I student athletes. There are few empirical studies including in-depth interviews with professional athletes, in part because they are skeptical to participate (Neuman, 1997) and because there are other general obstacles to gaining access to professional athletes (Benson, 2000; Funk, 1991; Winbush, 1988). Hence, this study adds to the current body of literature by providing a rare look into the experiences of professional athletes. Both purposive and snowball sampling were utilized in this research. The criteria for participation were as follows: (1) must be African-American male; (2) must have some experience in a professional, developmental, or semiprofessional sports league. The sample focused on African-American males for several reasons. First, African-American males have higher expectations for professional sports careers throughout the life course than any other group. Second, they are highly overrepresented in American popular culture as athletes. Third, they possess lower career maturity and preparation for life after sports. The participants were from universities all over the country. Personal connections were utilized for initial contacts. The respondents were contacted by phone or in person and given (or read) the description of the study. From there, snowballing led to the identification of additional participants.

In-depth semi-standardized interviews were used as the data collection technique and lasted from 1 to 3 h. Questions were open-ended, non-biased, and designed to elicit candid responses. A sample of these include, “Describe your experiences as a professional athlete,” “Talk about life in the league,” and “What are your immediate and future plans?” The data were hand-coded thematically with common terms, ideas, and phrases emerging after repeated line by line readings of the transcribed interviews (Berg, 2004). Three themes emerged out of the data: (1) lack of Control (over one’s own destiny), (2) lack of respect, and (3) politics. The findings presented in this study consist of direct quotes offered in the form of rich narratives articulated by the respondents under the three major themes that emerged.

Description of the Sample

The athletes interviewed ranged from ages 22 to 47. Three respondents were currently playing sports professionally or semiprofessionally during the time of the interview. One of the three players would be considered a very successful and popular NFL player at the time of the interview. Table 2 shows background and demographic information about the participants. Pseudonyms were assigned in order to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents.

Findings

Out of the 20 respondents interviewed for a larger project 14 respondents had experience in professional leagues. Some have played in the Arena Football League (AFL), others in the National Football League (NFL), a couple participated in the National Football League Europe, and one played with the Harlem Globetrotters. Many respondents felt underwhelmed by their actual experience in professional sports. Several mentioned

Table 2 Participant background information

Participant	Collegiate sport	Current age	Current occupation	Years in professional sports
Adam	Football	27	AFL	6 in AFL
Brad	Football	23	NFL	1 in NFL
Devin	Football	25	Unemployed	3 in NFL
Fred	Football	23	Agility trainer	6 months in NFL
Hubert	Football	26	Mortgage broker	1 in NFLE
				1.5 in NFL
Ivan	Football	34	Manager	1 in CFL
				1 in NFLE
				7 in AFL
Kevin	Football	27	AFL	4 in NFL
				1 in AFL
Lenny	Football	31	Firefighter	3 in NFL
				1 in CFL
Matt	Football	27	Mortgage loan officer	1 in AFL
Nate	Football	26	College football coach	2 in NFLE
Perry	Football	36	Firefighter	Less than 1 in NFL
Quinton	Basketball	45	Firefighter/ entrepreneur	Harlem Globetrotters, Europe
Richard	Football	47	Firefighter	2 in NFL
Tevin	Football	33	Firefighter	5 in NFL/NFLE

AFL Arena Football League, *NFL* National Football League, *NFLE* National Football League Europe, *CFL* Canadian Football League

feeling like property, or chattel. Similar to the athletes in the Dufur and Feinberg (2009) study and as discussed by Rhoden (2006), several (10 of 14) compared the NFL to modern day slavery. They were traded, cut, moved around, and from their perspectives, mistreated. Several mentioned many disappointments that led to a change in their focus concerning career paths.

Lack of Control

Many of the athletes felt as if they had no control over their lives or careers. They discussed the trades and cuts in terms of the teams “owning” them. In the NFL and NBA, teams can cut or trade the athletes at any time; no contract is necessarily “guaranteed.” Tevin discussed his experience and the uncertainty that was a constant during his career:

Uh well, I signed as a free agent, I thought I was gone get drafted, it didn’t happen my agent, he knew the personnel director for (Team A) and he called him up... they signed me to a free agent contract, I played a year with (Team A)... I was

good enough to make the practice squad. So that first year I didn't travel with the team, I just practice with them, ya know, I got paid for it, uh but the next year I went to camp, I had a great camp, I actually made the active roster that year, played in all the games made the playoffs.... after that season I went back to camp, I cut my leg out on the grass and got a real bad staph infection so I missed training camp and...they cut me. My agent called around, (Team B) signed me, they felt like I needed some more playing experience so they sent me over to Europe to play in the world league....that following training camp, I came back to (Team B)... had a great camp, thought I was gone make the team, but they cut me after the last preseason football game.....went back to Europe, played again in the World league, came back to the (Team B) training camp got cut again. So I said, forget it I'm done playing football.

Kevin also discussed moving from team to team:

I had a great camp and made the squad, the active roster, but got cut before the first game of the season. I had just moved my (wife) and baby to (Team A city) too cuz I had made the active roster so I thought I was gone be there for the whole season at the least.....I got picked up by (Team B), stayed one season then signed with (Team C) for two seasons. It was crazy, I really never knew where I was gone be.

Athletes can be cut even after signing a contract. The team is not required to honor the contract, but the athlete must adhere to the contract. Again this experience is not exclusive to African-American athletes. All professional athletes, regardless of race, face a similar challenge; however, the way in which these African-American athletes view their experiences suggests that their race plays an important role, as does the race of those in power and control over the athletes' futures.

Although media and popular discourse create a myth that the earnings of professional players are exorbitant, a recent study found that 78 % of retired NFL players are bankrupt within 2 years and 60 % of retired NBA players are bankrupt within 5 years (Torre 2009). Specifically, 80 % of all African-American professional athletes are bankrupt within 5 years of retirement (Lide 1984). Lenny had a similar experience with his finances. While most attribute this to young "rags to riches" minorities mismanaging their money, Lenny describes an alternate perspective:

....a lot people don't know that a lot of athletes even though they are making a lot of money they're ending up broke when there're finished. So I saw the handwriting on the wall and put pencil to it and because I was there I was giving my ten percent of my contract and the agent was getting three percent and then the 33 % that I was giving in taxes, you do the math you're paying fifty percent of the money out you might have a million dollar contract but your only getting five-hundred thousand...it's a one shot thing form most people so you end up broke... It's like you're robots, you're owned by a team.

Many of the respondents discussed finances in this way, and a feeling of being owned by their teams and leagues. It is important to understand that players' salaries

make up a small percentage of team budgets. Owners and managers retain the vast majority of profits earned through media contracts, ticket sales, and merchandising. Many of these players saw billionaire owners that controlled the financial lot of mostly minority workers who worked for much less and were bankrupt within years of sacrificing their bodies, health, and non-sports career development.

Lack of Respect

Several respondents discussed perceived “disrespect” from coaches and management. African-American athletes are often viewed as “naive, overcredulous, incomprehending” (Wacquant, 2002, p. 181). Athletes in this study discussed feeling patronized and that they were treated like a child by those in power to do so. Lenny felt as if players were not respected as men and when he stood up for himself, his career went on a downward spiral:

I never was solid on a team, uh I had a problem with the coaches, the way they talk down to you and you were less than a man and if you weren't in the top five percent of the money players..... That's the only reason I'm probably not playing now is because my coach, he talked to me bad and I told him if he did it again we were gonna have problems. Well he did it again and I had a fight with my coach. Then I started getting bounced around. I went to Canada, and I was supposed to sign with the (Team B)... and they never called me back. I felt like that was my sign that hey I was being blackballed out of the league because that situation.

In the above narrative, Lenny felt as if the coaches did not respect him as an adult. Tevin also discussed a lack of respect as an adult and as a man when coaches phoned his mother to try and persuade him to come back to football:

I came home, I was coaching at (high school), during that season the (Team B) called me up and said “hey our starting safety has gone down with a knee injury, we want to sign you to a contract.” I'm like “naw man, I'm done playing football, I'm tired of being cut and raised and brought back, I'm tired ya know.” So they *actually* called my mom, and tried to get my mom to talk to me get me signed back up. I'm a grown man, you call my mom! She called me ‘Tevin go head and do it one more time and Tevin get that money for the 14 games on the season and then be done with it.’ So I agreed with that. They sent me a plane ticket and said hey fly out tomorrow morning on this flight and the next morning came and I slept on it all night long, I said I can't do this, I'm not going back. I had a great job...so that morning the plane came I wasn't there....so once again the general manager called my mom, he actually threatened my mom. Well if Tevin don't come back, then he'll be ruined for life, he'll never play in NFL again. My mom got upset ya know...I went back played in all fourteen games had a great 14 game season, I did some good things. I thought that would be enough to solidify my spot with the (Team B)...but I got cut again the following season. With that I was out of it for good.

The respondents were asked if they felt race played any role in how they were treated by teams. Lenny stated “absolutely! It wasn't just that I didn't play the game, I

didn't take on the 'yes sir master' attitude, I was an uppity Negro." Tevin believed that no matter what, "it just seems like it is hard for them to see you any other way than a 'boy.'" Adam, who played many years in the Arena Football League felt as if his college coach at a major big time university football program "blackballed" him with NFL coaches. He also felt that race was a factor. He stated, "I took up for myself, I never let a man treat me like a 'boy'so I was labeled un-coachable and untouchable despite the fact that I was one of the fastest men in NCAA football at the time."

While many of the respondents discussed feeling like 'slaves,' Lenny articulated this feeling clearly:

Its modern day slavery is basically what I consider the NFL. They strip you down, they put you on stage, they put a big light on you and they have you turn around and they looking at your legs, your buttocks, your back, your chest, their measuring your hands, and you're a piece of meat to them and it really makes you feel like you're not a human. Then they take you through that long psychological test....you basically a piece of meat. They own you...

I wasn't a gangsta, I didn't kill nobody, my brother didn't kill nobody and really I wasn't really beneficial to the NFL. That's another aspect. I wasn't really attractive to the NFL because they couldn't have the opportunity to say 'look what the NFL has done, we rescued another poor black Negro from the projects.' They didn't have that storyline with me so I couldn't make money for them.

"Politics"

Many athletes attributed their lack of success to "politics." They used this term to describe the unfair judgment of their athletic potential based primarily around other issues outside of their actual abilities. Matt discusses "politics", but also the lack of control over his life that he felt in his quest to secure a job with the NFL:

Once again I think it was political and that whole thing there, I thought I had pretty good chances, everybody else thought I had pretty good chances but coaches have a big say so and in your character when he's talking to different teams he has a big say so and what he, ya know, his word is kinda bond. So whatever he says goes so..... that whole experience, I think that's where my depression came in at. Because at that point, you don't have no scholarship, you don't have money at all coming in, unless you're working a job and its kinda difficult to work a job and try to make these try outs, stay in shape, tip top shape and ya know going all over to different towns and states trying to make workouts and things like that so.....

Matt felt as if his college coach did not speak highly of his "character" to NFL scouts, and that kept him from getting a contract. He is not sure why, but discussed transitioning from having an African-American head coach as a freshman, sophomore, and junior, to having a White head coach as a senior. He stated "I just think he saw me as some kind of thug or typical Black thug." Fred found it difficult to understand what all goes into what he called the "politics" of the game:

A lot of players in the league, it's different from what everybody thinks it is, it's not It is different because people look at NFL like if they don't succeed it's their own fault, that's not necessarily the case cuz the NFL is something that uh, it's not just controlled by how much ability you have and your ability to understand plays and do what you have to do on the field; it's a whole lot of something else really that I don't understand. That's why it is so hard to get in and stay in or to get drafted or to go free agent.

Finally, Perry views professional sport as any other typical business. He believes that being successful is not entirely based on ability, but a combination of marketability (as discussed by Tevin), attitude, and the players ability to gain the coaches and general managers good graces through deference and “staying in your place.” He discusses his experience:

On the professional level...I got the wakeup call that this is about business and all the idiosyncrasies of business of being a professional athlete and then realizing that I went from a group of good athletes, the good athletes went on to college, the above average or great athletes went on and got a chance to go on to play professional football, but all the athletes in professional football have some greatness about them...but when I was up there among all the great athletes and you know that your abilities are better than another athlete, but because of the political games that are going on with being in that business, it took so much fun, fairness out of it...

Discussion and Conclusions

This study allowed athletes to articulate their experiences in professional athletics. With this small sample size their sentiments cannot be generalized, however, all 14 of these respondents had similar interpretations of their experiences. Each athlete discussed race before any prompting from the researcher. They infused race in every aspect of their professional sports narratives. The racism that the athletes discuss is primarily symbolic. From these respondents' perspectives, the white coaches and managers “control” their lives and livelihoods and expect deference because of their power to do so. The lack of opportunity for coaching and leadership positions, which could be seen as a type of institutional discrimination, has perpetuated a system in which those with power, are white and those without, are largely African-American.

Additionally, since only a very small percentage of athletes land a professional sports contract and even fewer become very successful professional athletes, these types of experiences are far more common than the glory stories we see in the media. While it is counterintuitive to believe that the media should showcase these stories of “losers” to a society that mostly cares about “winners,” it is the lack of balance of other images of successful African-American males that creates this area of contested terrain around sports. Sports are presented to the public by the media to be an “easy way” if not the only way for young African-American males to become successful. When, in fact, it is far more probable that their experiences will mirror those of the respondents in this study. Even more probable, they will never play collegiate or professional sports at all.

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