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# Exploitation in college sports: Race, revenue, and educational reward

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## Abstract

The question of whether college athletes are exploited is regularly debated in the popular press and academic literature about college sports. The concept of exploitation, with its philosophical and psychological implications, however, is rarely discussed in detail. This paper problematizes and expands the way in which the concept has been presented within the context of college sports, arguing that exploitation is primarily a moral construct understood as an unfair exchange between two parties. For college athletes, an unfair financial exchange can be measured by comparing the surplus value and marginal revenue product. These calculations may evidence the degree of economic exploitation, but many people still believe college athletes are fairly compensated with a subsistence wage in the form of an athletic scholarship. It is more difficult to quantify the promise or value of an education above and beyond this subsistence wage, most often defined as a college degree. The over-representation of Black college athletes on revenue-producing teams, and the corresponding lower graduation rates of this population when compared to other students, highlight the racial and cultural divisions of opportunity. Institutions face a crisis of conscience when educational opportunities are offered to certain students based primarily on their athletic ability, especially when these opportunities are perceived as disingenuous due to the academic preparation and demanding athletic commitments of these recruited college athletes.

## Keywords

college athletes, commodification, exploitation, NCAA Division I, race

Beyond entertaining people and providing a vehicle for physical expression, sports serve to support and maintain cultural values espoused at a given place in time. Sports also provide opportunities for cultural resistance, confronting the very social values promoted as worthy of being maintained (Carrington, 2009; Coakley, 2009; Gruneau, 1983; Nichols, 2011). Sports, then, are sites of ideological struggle (Bourdieu, 1978; Burstyn, 2001; Clarke and Clarke, 1982; Sage, 1998). In particular, dominant forms of sporting practices often reproduce dominant cultural ideologies, supporting the social divisions

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inherent to reigning race, class, and gender relations (Beamish, 2009; Carrington and McDonald, 2009; Foley, 2001; Mahiri and Van Rheenen, 2010; Messner, 1992; St Louis, 2009). Within this dynamic site of resistance and reproduction, college sports are a social and geographic space of disparate power and potential. More specifically, college sports are often heralded as vehicles for racial integration and upward social mobility. Successful integration and mobility are thought to be achieved by providing educational opportunities to a diverse group of students, many of whom might be unable to attend college were it not for their athletic abilities and corresponding sports scholarships. Conversely, critics argue that American college sports represent a form of systemic exploitation, perpetuated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its member institutions against college athletes, particularly Black athletes, who are promised an education in exchange for their intercollegiate sports participation (Branch, 2011; Lewis, 2007; Nocero, 2011a, 2011b; Zirin, 2011).

This paper addresses this latter claim, problematizing and expanding the proposition that these educational institutions exploit college athletes. On the one hand, the 'exploited college athlete' narrative reads like a tired tale, a story that receives repeated attention annually when bowl games and college basketball's March Madness illuminate the true size of big-time college sports—an economic and cultural enterprise based on the athletic performance of 18–21 year olds. On the other hand, these problems persist. As the size of the American college sports enterprise has dramatically increased over the past century, so too have the problems.

Since former executive director of the NCAA Walter Byers coined the term *student-athlete* in the 1950s (Sperber, 1999), critics have weighed in on the inconsistencies of college sports, fueling a debate over the commercialization of "the capitalist-athletic complex" (St Louis, 2009) and the commodification of young men and women (Byers and Hammer, 1995; Coakley, 2009; Eitzen, 2000; Sage, 1998; Zimbalist, 1999, 2006). Faculty and university presidents (e.g., Bowen and Levin, 2003; Duderstadt, 2000; Shulman and Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 1990, 2000) caution against the promotion of entertainment sports at the expense of academic priorities and the mission of higher education. Most agree that the revenue-producing sports of football and basketball pose the greatest threat to institutional control and integrity. The college athletes recruited to compete in these sports pose an institutional dilemma, as they are often the most academically under-prepared relative to other students but are admitted nonetheless.

Despite decades of caution and criticism, the problems of college sports seem stubbornly resistant to change. While the prospects for reform may be bleak (and a Marxist reading would suggest that the nature of capitalism and the place of higher education and sport within the economic system at this historic moment has inevitably created the social and economic conditions witnessed within college sports today), there may be some encouraging signs that real change could be afoot. These signs have manifested themselves in shame and sheer disgust at the hypocrisy of college sports today.

Duke economist Charles Clotfelter (2011) has called for a new candor about the role and importance of college sports within American higher education and society at large, while others have turned candor into condemnation. What began as voices on the margins have become a more mainstream fatigue regarding the greed in our many social institutions, including the hallowed squares, courts and playing fields of our

colleges and universities. More and more, the American public acknowledges that amateurism in college sports, particularly among Division I football and men's basketball, is more principle than reality. As Michael Lewis (2007: 1) argues, "[the] principle, as stated by the NCAA, is that college sports should never be commercialized. But it's too late for that. College football is already commercialized, for everyone except the people who play it." Sonny Vaccaro, former godfather of commercialized basketball turned crusader, points out that "ninety percent of the NCAA revenue is produced by 1 percent of the athletes," and in the skill positions, who arguably generate the greatest revenue, the producers of this athletic labor are "ninety percent African American" (in Branch, 2011: 21).

These disparities between labor (inputs) and revenue (outputs) has led Joe Nocero (2011b: 3) to cry foul:

[T]he hypocrisy that permeates big-time college sports takes your breath away. College football and men's basketball have become such huge commercial enterprises that together they generate more than \$6 billion in annual revenue, more than the National Basketball Association. A top college coach can make as much or more than a professional coach; Ohio State just agreed to pay Urban Meyer \$24 million over six years.

Real change may occur not just in the court of public opinion but also in the court of law, which seeks, among other functions, to adjudicate fairness and moral turpitude. In "The Shame of College Sports," civil-rights historian Taylor Branch (2011) argues that a series of lawsuits could dramatically change the face of college sports by limiting the powers of the NCAA. Central to several pending and proposed suits, focusing on antitrust violations, rights of publicity and taxation, is the central but flawed principle of amateurism. Branch asserts (26), "No legal definition of amateurism exists, and any attempt to create one in enforceable law would expose its unconstitutional nature – a bill of attainder, stripping from college athletes the rights of American citizenship."

Perhaps fearing that the current and highly lucrative gig may be up, the NCAA Executive Board of Directors passed a resolution in December 2011 which allows institutions to offer multi-year scholarships and increase these athletics grants-in-aid by as much as US\$2000 annually, based upon the full cost of attending school (Wieberg, 2011). These NCAA legislative efforts reflect a growing, more mainstream concern for greater fairness in college sports, suggesting that a more comprehensive understanding of the perceived exploitation of college athletes is needed. This paper contributes to existing literature but contextualizes the problem within the historical and social conditions of college sports today.

The first section introduces the premise that exploitation is essentially a moral construct, understood as an unfair exchange between two parties. The following sections focus on the purported unfair financial exchange between college athletes and universities, explicating concepts such as commodification, surplus value, and marginal revenue product (MRP). These concepts draw on both Marxist, and other neo-classical notions of economic exploitation. As college athletes are regarded as amateurs rather than as professionals, a strict financial exchange is complicated by both presumed and actual

in-kind rewards, such as educational opportunities and attainment. Thus, the value of an education, the sincerity of its promise, and the tangible rewards associated with this opportunity become factors to better understand the apparent exploitation of college athletes. The final section of the paper focuses on race, the historical legacy of Black physical commodification, and the over-representation of African Americans in the revenue-producing sports of college football and men's basketball. The recruitment and admission of these physically gifted prospects to many educational institutions, despite their often lower academic profiles than other matriculating students, reveal how some schools appear to prioritize athletic over academic potential, particularly among young Black males.

## Exploitation as a moral concept

Exploitation is a term that is overused and poorly understood. In the realm of college sports, Leonard (1986: 38) notes that "exploitation is a multi-faceted intercollegiate sports phenomenon. It contains fiscal, educational, racial, social, and moral overtones." This may be so, but exploitation is first and foremost a moral construct. Though the exploitive act may involve money or other perceived social values such as education, and may impact certain groups of individuals differently (e.g., children, women, working class, African Americans), exploitation is a moral-philosophical concept. From a moral perspective, exploitation occurs when one party receives unfair and undeserved benefits from its transactions or relationships with others (Wertheimer, 1996). Or, as Sample (2003: 15) notes, "exploitation is fundamentally a means to an end by [sic] using another person (or thing) to advance one's ends." This definition is similar to Kant's philosophical notion of a *kingdom of ends*, an ideal moral community in which rational beings treat themselves and others "never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end in himself" (Kant and Paton, 1964: 7). Fry (2000: 52) believes this practical Kantian imperative to mean that "we must always treat persons as having value in and of themselves apart from their use value."

Based upon this moral understanding of exploitation, one could certainly argue that colleges and universities receive undeserved benefits from student athletes, using their athletic talents as a means to the institution's ends of generating revenue and public visibility. As such, the relationship between college athletes and institutions of higher learning may well be exploitive. Of course, one could argue that college sports in general unfairly benefit from the performance of student athletes, implicating the NCAA, athletic conferences, and the athletic departments and institutions which comprise these organizations. Thus, the college sports industry or capitalist-athletic complex might be seen as exploiting college athletes as a means to its profit-motivated ends of selling tickets, generating broadcasting revenue, and enhancing donor support. Numerous authors (e.g., Barro, 1991; Becker, 1985, 1987; Branch, 2011; Byers and Hammer, 1995; Fleisher et al., 1992; Koch, 1973, 1978; McCormick and Meiners, 1987; Nocero, 2011; Noll, 1991; Zimbalist, 1999, 2006) have argued that the NCAA is an economic cartel, despite its status as a nonprofit educational organization. Fort and Quirk (1999) argue that individual athletic departments behave similarly to the NCAA, maximizing profits and masking the recipients of cartel revenues, such as coaches' salaries, administrative costs,

and state-of-the-art facilities. These criticisms have prompted policymakers to propose greater scrutiny of these institutions' nonprofit status, questioning the sincerity of their educational mission and seeking to treat these organizations like other profit-motivated businesses (Branch, 2011; Dodd, 2011; Wieberg, 2006). These criticisms highlight the moral dilemma of colleges and universities who simultaneously promote the virtues of education and the business of college sports, profiting from the athletic performance of a minority of their students.

## Surplus value and the commodification of the college athlete

Economists and social theorists argue that exploitation can be measured. From a Marxist perspective, exploitation is measurable through calculations of surplus value. In this sense, human labor has an economic value. Compensation, however, is often less than the total worth of a worker's labor, usually equivalent to the worker's means of subsistence. The remaining portion above and beyond this subsistence is considered surplus labor and the value it produces is surplus value. Marx was concerned with the ways capitalists sought to profit by appropriating this surplus value from their workers and thus exploiting them and their labor. It is important to note, however, that Marx's attempt to conceptualize labor power and value was part of his broader analysis and critique of capitalism as a precursor to political struggle.

In his essay "Wage-Labour and Capital," a precursor to *Capital*, Marx (2004: 11) writes, "[l]abour power, therefore, is a commodity, neither more or less than sugar. The former is measured by the clock, the latter by the scales." Because athletic labor is regularly evaluated in terms of its relative performance or production, it has a use value and can be exchanged for money or other products of like value. As an exchangeable use value, this form of labor becomes commodified.

As Marx and Engels (2007: 42) argue in *Capital, Part I*:

The utility of a thing makes it a use value ... A commodity, such as iron, corn, or a diamond, is therefore, so far as it is a material thing, a use value, something useful ... Use values become a reality only by use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form [of] that wealth ... they are, in addition, the material depositories of exchange value.

They add: "A use-value, or useful article, therefore, has value only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialized in it. How, then, is the magnitude of this value to be measured? Plainly, by the quantity of the value-creating substance, the labour, contained in the article" (Marx and Engels, 2007: 45).

Commodification occurs whether human labor is transformed into a material product, such as a pair of shoes, or reified as athletic production. Rigauer (1981: 68) argues that "the athlete's achievement is transformed into a commodity and is exchanged on the market for its equivalent value, expressed in money." Simply put, a worker in a sweat shop exchanges labor for a wage just as an athlete sells sweat labor for money or in-kind compensation. While commodification presupposes the construction of an object that

can be traded or exchanged so that surplus value can be extracted in the form of profit, Whannel (2009: 81) reminds us that "a commodity is only a moment in the circuit of capital, and ... commodification is a process, not an object." This process of commodification is fully independent of whether the participating producer is a professional or an amateur athlete. "In either event, the spectator-consumer receives the material object called for" (Rigauer, 1981: 68).

And yet, defining college athletes as amateurs serves multiple purposes for educational institutions: (a) it maximizes profits for the schools; (b) as amateurs, these athletes are not considered employees and thus receive no workers' compensation or other benefits; (c) viewing college athletes as non-employees means that the NCAA escapes scrutiny as an illegal business cartel; and (d) none of the money generated by amateur athletes for the NCAA and its member institutions is taxable because it is part of an educational program. This leads Eitzen (2001: 209) to argue that "in effect, university administrators are using the ideal of amateurism as an exploitive ideology."

Thus, the amateur student athlete is crucial to the college sports market, differentiated by competition level (e.g., the distinction of Division I, II, and III member institutions) and type of athletic labor or sport (e.g., revenue vs. Olympic or non-revenue). While the relative exchange value of these college athletes may be quantified in terms of money, these participants may also produce prestige for a given institution. The prestige of an institution may be enhanced by its athletic production, related to, but also distinct from, material considerations.<sup>1</sup>

The desire for institutional prestige and financial gain propels athletic programs to compete within a high stakes market, often focusing more on athletic performance than on student development (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011; Van Rheenen et al., 2011). The end result may well be a winning program, but one comprised of potentially alienated student athletes, disconnected from the team's production on the field or court and their own self expression. As specialized parts in a mechanized athletic system, these college athletes often feel replaceable and only as good as their last game (Coakley, 2009; Eitzen, 2000; Messner, 1992; Sage, 1998). As Rigauer (1981: 72–73) argues,

This reification of productive behavior into a commodity brings with it the possibility of substituting or exchanging one person for another: the possessor of quantitatively assessed low abilities can, when he fails to fulfill the production goals assigned to him, be replaced by the possessor of greater abilities ... Athletes can thus be directly compared to one another on the basis of their market value.

Where the potential for revenue is involved, the pressure to perform within this system of production is even greater. So too is the potential for alienation increased. As Beamish (2009) clarifies, Marx detailed four key aspects of this alienation: (a) workers neither own nor control the products of their labor, (b) they do not control the production process, (c) production within a capitalistic economy alienates human beings from the full creative potential of labor, and, finally, (d) alienated labor creates specific social and production relations of opposition.

Most analyses of exploitation in college sports focus solely on the first two aspects of this articulated alienation: college athletes' lack of ownership and control of their own



labor and the production process. But, as Marx and Engels (2004: 42) argues in *The German Ideology*:

This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expression of their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production (author's italics).

Thus, while Marxist analyses persuasively argue how modern institutions such as school and sport have been shaped by capitalist industrialization, reproducing relations of power and structures of dominance (Brohm, 1978; Rigauer, 1981), some of the more traditional or orthodox interpretations have been critiqued as overly deterministic and reductionist. Such orthodox analyses have tended to reduce sport to a mere reflection of abstract capitalist production devoid of human agency and creativity, as expressed in the context of cultural and historical limits and possibilities (Carrington, 2009; Gruneau, 1983).

Similarly, as Clotfelter (2011: 209) asserts, "one need not be a Marxist to appreciate the unfairness of the arrangement" between college athletes and many American educational institutions. For example, another way of quantifying an athlete's value vis-à-vis their corresponding compensation is the determination of marginal revenue product.

## Marginal revenue product

As Fizel et al. (1999: 4) note, "the sports industry provides some of the best opportunities for testing various economic theories that address the unique institutional characteristics of that industry." Whether in college or professional sports, outputs and inputs can be measured by a team's wins and the relative productivity of the workers' or players' labor, respectively. In terms of revenue as a potential output and desired outcome, the theory of marginal productivity in sports assumes that teams, leagues, and athletic departments seek to maximize their profits. According to this economic theory, marginal revenue product (MRP) is the change in total revenue resulting from a unit change in a variable input, keeping all other inputs unchanged. As Sandy et al. (2004: 70) argue, "it is possible to obtain more precise estimates of each player's marginal revenue product and determine whether salaries match this figure. If players are paid less than the value of their MRP they are, by definition, exploited." The term exploitation, as used here, has a narrower meaning in economics than in everyday language. An athlete paid US\$10 million per year would still be exploited if he was producing US\$20 million annually for the team's revenue. Conversely, the authors argue, "someone being paid a lower than subsistence wage, say \$1 an hour, would not be exploited if his marginal revenue product was \$1 or less" (2004: 70).

With this principle applied to amateur college athletes, who do not receive salaries but athletics grants-in-aid, Fort and Quirk (1999) proposed that Division I college football players are compensated less than their contribution to athletic department revenues.



This is particularly the case for “blue-chip” or star players. For example, Noll (1991) found an increase of revenue of US\$200,000 during the 1987 Stanford football season due to the addition of the quarterback as the only major roster change that season. Noll estimated the value of an athletic scholarship that year to be less than US\$20,000, more than ten times the increase in revenue relative to the cost of the quarterback’s athletic labor as an input. Brown (1993) estimated even larger profits in revenue for athletic departments, estimating the marginal revenue product of college football stars at about US\$500,000 and US\$1 million for college basketball stars annually, and concluding that these college athletes were exploited economically.

To demonstrate just how big Division I college football and basketball had become by 2010, Auburn quarterback and Heisman Trophy winner Cam Newton was estimated to be worth US\$3.5 million annually for his school, a prodigious amount relative to the cost of his full athletic scholarship—or even when compared to the US\$180,000–US\$200,000 that Newton’s father had attempted to secure from a particular university in exchange for his son’s commitment to attend (Moskowitz and Wertheim, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

At some institutions, specifically Division I colleges and universities, the revenue sports of men’s basketball and football help support the non-revenue or Olympic sports, as well as the other costs incurred by the athletic department.<sup>3</sup> This structure of potentially exploiting some college athletes for the benefit of a larger group of student athletes poses an interesting philosophical dilemma. Given Title IX legislation and the federal mandates surrounding gender equity in college sports, there may be moral, if not legal, grounds for protecting the equality of the majority by exploiting the minority. As Wertheimer (1996: 91–92) notes,

It might be argued that it is undesirable, nay unjust, that student athletes in surplus programs should fare better than student athletes in nonsurplus programs. We may think it more important to ensure equality between male and female student athletes than to eliminate this form of exploitation.

On the other hand, it may be unjust for male and female non-revenue college athletes to gain unfairly from the surplus labor of their revenue-producing peers. While their participation opportunities may be protected by historical precedent and legal mandate, the moral question remains as to who directly or indirectly benefits from the surplus labor of these revenue-generating college athletes. This debate creates something of a conundrum, especially when colleges and universities must eliminate varsity sports based upon financial shortfalls (Suggs, 2003; Van Rheen et al., 2011). If participation opportunities, rather than revenue generation, provide the educational rationale for the existence of intercollegiate athletics (Brown, 2010; Duderstadt, 2000), then perhaps educational institutions should either re-evaluate their sponsorship of sports entertainment on college campuses or acknowledge the unfair financial exchange offered to their amateur [but also] revenue student-athletes.

## **Educational reward and the promise of an education**

Complicating these moral and economic analyses is the hypothetical value of an education—or, more specifically, the social and economic advantages of attending college and

earning a college degree. Despite rising tuition and student-loan debt levels, the long-term benefits of earning a college degree are growing; workers with a college degree earn much more and are much less likely to be unemployed than those with only a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2011).

Similarly, there are social benefits connected with earning a bachelor's degree. College graduates are more likely to volunteer, vote, exercise, and have health insurance and pensions. They are also less likely to smoke, be obese, or have low-birth-weight babies (Baum and Ma, 2007; Baum et al., 2010). These findings are even more pronounced for low-income, first-generation college-bound students, who may benefit the most from a post-secondary degree. Although high school graduates from low- and moderate-income families are much less likely than those from higher-income families to enroll in college, and the gaps in graduation rates are even larger, the incremental gain in their earnings resulting from a college education is significantly greater than that of those students from more affluent backgrounds (Baum et al., 2010).

Thus, other than economic analyses of surplus value and marginal revenue product, the most commonly cited argument that exploitation occurs in college sports focuses on whether institutions provide genuine educational opportunities to their athletes, particularly those on the revenue-generating teams. While critics may disagree on what constitutes a genuine educational opportunity, the evidence most often used is the noted discrepancies in the graduation rates of college athletes relative to the general student body, and comparisons by social categories, such as race and gender, within and across different sport teams.

While the NCAA (2010c) reports that college athletes graduate at higher rates than the general student body across all member institutions, the numbers are less impressive when broken down by division, type of institution, sport, gender, and race. For example, according to a study of basketball players' graduation rates from 1999 to 2003 released by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida (Lapchick, 2010), 79% of the teams in the 2010 Men's Division I NCAA Tournament graduated at least 70% of their White athletes, while only 31% of the teams in the field graduated at least 70% of their Black players: a 48% achievement gap in graduation rates.

While Black student athletes tend to graduate at higher rates than their peers at non-historically Black schools generally (NCAA, 2010c), only 20 of the 50 flagship state universities post a higher graduation rate for Black athletes relative to African American students generally. An editorial in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2005: 2) argues:

It appears that many of these flagship state universities are admitting Black students who are not academically qualified for even the moderately rigorous curricula at these schools. In many cases, these Black athletes are admitted solely for the purpose of their participation in intercollegiate athletics. The case is strong that these flagship universities are exploiting Blacks for their athletic talents while frequently ignoring their educational needs.

Based upon these numbers, critics have generally blamed these educational institutions for making false promises to young Black males. According to Figler (1981, in

Leonard, 1986: 40), a college athlete is exploited when “he is recruited into the college setting without possessing the necessary abilities or background to have a reasonable chance of succeeding academically.”

Even when these students do graduate, there may be claims that the college athlete has been exploited, often citing a degree in a major or discipline with little value. As James Duderstadt (2000: 5–6), former college football player and President of the University of Michigan, notes, “Some universities take advantage of their student-athletes, exploiting their athletic talents for financial gain and public visibility, and tolerating low graduation rates and meaningless degrees in majors like general studies or recreational life.”

Few of the editorials and exposés which claim athletic exploitation in college sports ever ask the college athletes how they feel about their educational and sports experiences, instead speaking for them as passive victims of systemic exploitation or disenfranchisement. However, in one large-scale study of 581 active Division I college athletes, Van Rheenen (2011) found that nearly one-third of all participants reported feeling exploited by their institution. While the revenue sport athletes participating in football and men’s basketball were seven times more likely to feel that they were taken advantage of by their institution, with nearly three quarters of these revenue college athletes reporting that they felt exploited, a full one-quarter of non-revenue college athletes also reported feeling exploited.

In a qualitative study of 20 Black former Division I male revenue college athletes, Beamon (2008) reported that many of the athletes felt like “used goods,” exploited by their college or university for their athletic talents. The fact that 90% of these Black college athletes also graduated from their institutions suggests that feelings of exploitation among Black male revenue college athletes relate to more complicated matters than the simple exchange of playing college football or basketball and earning a degree in return. Perhaps the perceived unfair financial exchange between college athletes and their respective institutions outweighs the apparent value of an education, particularly as the dividends of this education may have yet to be realized economically and socially. These athletes may also feel shortchanged in terms of the kind of education received, as they are forced to spend the bulk of their time on athletic commitments rather than on academic and career development.

Additionally, the career aspirations of college athletes are often more complex than is presented in the popular media. For example, many student athletes, particularly those in the revenue sports of football and men’s basketball, may focus their sights on professional athletic careers rather than (or at least in addition to) pursuing the promise of an education, or what is narrowly defined as a college degree. In this sense, college may be as much about the opportunity to be seen by professional scouts as it is about the prospect of earning a meaningful degree. At least some of the most highly gifted college athletes, who generate the greatest revenue for their respective colleges or universities, will leave school early to enter the professional ranks, limiting both the institutional costs and potential revenues earned. These individuals may well have benefited their colleges and universities, but they have likewise benefited from the media exposure and economic opportunity to display their athletic talents and potential to professional scouts, teams, and leagues.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the majority of these college athletes will never play professionally. As Adler and Adler (1991) demonstrated in their ethnographic study of one Division I men's basketball program, upperclassmen on the team reported feeling more exploited as they came to realize that a professional athletic career was less realistic. This sense of "feeling used" appears to be as much about hoop dreams unfulfilled as it is about the false promises of an educational opportunity. Both of these experiences may be at play simultaneously.

These experiences appear to be more pronounced among Black male revenue college athletes. Because the revenue-generating sports of college football and men's basketball disproportionately recruit from the African American community, leading in part to the over-representation of Black athletes in the National Football League and National Basketball Association, any discussion of athletic exploitation in the United States must acknowledge race as an important and confounding variable. Where colleges and universities benefit disproportionately from the recruitment and admission of Black male athletes specifically, exploitation as an unfair exchange is further complicated with charges of institutional racism.

## **Black physical commodification and athletic exploitation**

In *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White Institutions*, Hawkins (2010: 71) argues that

There is an institutionalization of cultural and social racism coupled with economic and political exploitation ... between [predominately White institutions] and Black athletes ... The dehumanization of Black athletes takes place when these institutions value Blacks more as athletes than as students, especially when output (athletic performance) does not equal input (educational opportunities).

Sellers (2000: 146) notes that "universities, with a surplus of applicants for admission, seem to only show an interest in those individuals from poorer educational backgrounds who have skills that are unique and exploitive, such as the athlete." The exploitation inherent to the admission of these recruited athletes has other negative consequences for these students. At many institutions, they are perceived as mere interlopers within the academic domain, emblematic of higher education's ambivalence and resentment towards college sports and the young men and women who embody the jock identity. This, in turn, leads to stereotypes and discrimination, experienced as microaggressions from faculty and fellow students (Franklin, 1999; Franklin and Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Simons et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2007). Such stigma and microaggressions may disproportionately impact Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWI's), making these students feel less welcome or invisible (Franklin, 2006; Franklin and Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Steele, 1992). According to Franklin (1999: 118),

Microaggressions cause feelings of powerlessness because of the element of surprise and the person's inability to control, much less eliminate, these experiences. They are embedded in the

unconscious dynamics of cross-racial interactions, creating wariness and anxious anticipation. Their intention, in the conceptual wisdom of the African American community, is to remind one of one's unprivileged status, giving credence to feelings of being victimized.

While a Marxist analysis would emphasize college athletes' lack of control of their labor within the production process, Franklin's discussion reveals a lack of psycho-social control within a highly racialized environment. These lived experiences among many Black college athletes both problematize and expand the concept of exploitation as a social phenomenon rather than simply an unfair economic and educational (as payment in kind) exchange.

However, as Beamish (2009: 95) reminds us, while the alienation which occurs as a byproduct of commodification is indeed an economic relation, it also has significant social implications. The conditions of alienation

are a set of real, objective social conditions that exist in societies where the means of production are owned and controlled by a minority within civil society. They are not a psychological state of mind—indeed, one might not even be consciously aware of the objective class antagonisms, the real and potential conflicts that alienated labor produces, or feel any unhappiness, anxiety or concern about producing under capitalist relations of production.

For Black male athletes, their sense of racial invisibility is juxtaposed with a hyper-visibility around their athletic identity, reaffirming that “schools value their athletic competency but not their academic potential” (Harris, 2000: 45). In this regard, “Black males are either rendered invisible or are viewed as helpless victims of a racist system” (Majors, 1998: 16). As perceived victims of a racist system, Black male college athletes are more likely than their non-Black peers to feel exploited even though, structurally speaking, the economic exploitation of college athletes, as measured by surplus values and marginal revenue product, would seem to take equal advantage of all races and ethnicities.

However, Van Rheenen (2011) found that Black college athletes felt significantly more exploited than their non-Black peers across every category of college athlete. These racial differences were found for both revenue and non-revenue college athletes, suggesting that Black college athletes were far more sensitive to their physical commodification in sport, even when participating on intercollegiate athletic teams which earned no surplus revenue for their university's athletic department. These findings suggest that race clearly underlies participants' perceptions of feeling exploited by their colleges or universities.

This sense of alienation and exploitation has led critics to draw parallels between modern American sports and the historical legacy and practices of slavery, focusing in particular on the physical commodification of the black body (Eitzen, 2000; Mahiri and Van Rheenen, 2010; Rhoden, 2006). In *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, Rhoden (2006) argued that despite the fame, fortune, and tremendous achievements of Black athletes in the United States today, these participants have little to no power in the multi-billion dollar sports industry. Rhoden compared today's African American athletes to indentured slaves of the past, arguing that the primary difference is that today's Black athletes bear responsibility for their own enslavement.

The persistent comparison of playing fields to plantations has led some to caution against the overuse of loose language. As Branch (2011: 5) argues,

Slavery analogies should be used carefully. College athletes are not slaves. Yet to survey the scene – corporations and universities enriching themselves on the backs of uncompensated young men, whose status as “student-athletes” deprives them of the right to due process guaranteed by the Constitution – is to catch an unmistakable whiff of the plantation. Perhaps a more apt metaphor is colonialism: college sports, as overseen by the NCAA, is a system imposed by well-meaning paternalists and rationalized with hoary sentiments about caring for the well-being of the colonized. But it is, nonetheless, unjust.

At the collegiate level, where the principle of amateurism precludes the fortune to which Rhoden refers, a case could be made that revenue athletes who produce surplus value and merely receive a subsistence wage are far more exploited than their professional peers. The socio-political exploitation to which Hawkins and Rhoden refer could be similar for both college and professional athletes, in that neither possesses any real decision-making power vis-à-vis the NCAA and its member institutions or professional franchises and their owners, respectively. But while professional athletes may compare owners’ treatment of players to “modern-day slavery” (Fowler, 2011; see also Prior, 2006; Zirin, 2007), the NFL and NBA at least recognize players’ unions and rights to workers’ compensation; conversely, amateur college athletes have never successfully unionized and organized as a collective bargaining entity. In general, college athletes have few opportunities to exercise their rights nationally: “They have no union, no arbitration board, and rarely do they have representation on campus athletic committees” (Eitzen, 2009: 190).

By celebrating and commodifying African American athletic performance in college and professional sports, institutions continue to support racial hierarchies of intellectual and physical superiority. These racial hierarchies are reproduced within a larger social discourse of division: the division of mind and body, of male and female, of Black and White, and of sport and school. Performative displays in sport both structure and police the boundaries of perception regarding the kinds of attributes that attend to one group versus another, such that even similar experiences can be charged with very different racial meanings (Andrews, 1996; Mahiri and Van Rhee, 2010; Simons, 2003). Thus, the cultural archetype of the athletically gifted but academically suspect “dumb jock” reproduces artificial divisions of mind and body. When the so-called dumb jock is also Black, the ante is increased, adding to a cultural logic which in turn reinforces racial ideologies of Black physical superiority and intellectual weakness. As the stakes get higher, the losses can be calculated in real numbers and real lives.

The alienation and exploitation of Black college athletes, then, is grounded both culturally and historically within an American race logic, attributing the notable athletic achievements of African Americans to natural, physical abilities and a biological advantage over other races (Coakley, 2009; Hoberman, 1997; St Louis, 2003, 2004). This logic or cultural ideology prevails in modern society despite a history of racial segregation and discrimination which has limited the opportunities for African Americans, particularly Black males, to achieve success in most spheres of social life other than sports (Edwards, 1985; Majors, 1998; Staples, 1982). Many Black youth internalize this logic, seeing a



career in sports as their cultural and biological destiny (Coakley, 2009; Eitzen, 1999). But where sport appears to be one of the few avenues that provides true equal opportunity, it is more often a dead end for many young males drawn to athletic careers (Edwards, 1985; Majors, 1998). Thus, slavishly pursuing a career in sports can be about more than the commodification of one's own athletic body for the production of surplus value. It can also mean feeling shackled and bound by cultural expectations of sport success and social mobility (Mahiri and Van Rheenen, 2010).

This emphasis on athletic achievement and advancement begins well before these young men and women matriculate to college. In fact, those recruited to attend a college or university on an athletic scholarship are generally recognized as cultural success stories, Horatio Algers in hightops, having parlayed athletic talent for the opportunity to earn a meaningful degree. In theory, higher education affords opportunities for many individuals to enter spheres of social life otherwise inaccessible to them. It is also through education and the development of critical and analytical skills that college athletes may begin to reflect meaningfully on their lives (Comeaux and Harrison, 2011). Such self-reflection may include questioning their feelings of alienation and exploitation while also investigating their own athletic privileges on college campuses. A critical perspective potentially empowers college athletes to work towards a more balanced approach to academics and athletics, gaining greater control of a destiny that may or may not include sports. Such a perspective could contribute to these students' desire—indeed, their demand—to realize a genuine educational opportunity.

## Conclusion

Exploitation can be defined as an unfair exchange between two parties. Based upon this definition, this paper has sought to examine the common claim that college athletes are exploited, a passive construction of moral and educational consequence. While passive constructions mask who or what is ultimately responsible for the articulated action, critics have most commonly held educational institutions, such as colleges and universities (and the conferences and associations to which they belong), primarily responsible for the exploitation of college athletes.

As revenue-generating sports provide the conditions for the greatest likelihood of athletic exploitation to take place, there is reason for concern. But the reasons are far more complex than generally described in the popular press. As outlined in this paper, exploitation may be understood as economic, educational, and social. Economic exploitation can be measured by the commodification of college athletes and their production of athletic surplus value and marginal revenue for institutions that benefit unfairly from their labor. The financial exchange is unfair when college athletes' labor produces more than their subsistence wage, defined as a full athletic scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

These antagonisms are further complicated by the promise of an education in exchange for athletic performance. A fair exchange between college athletes and educational institutions involves more than room, board, books, and tuition; the exchange provides the opportunity for students to receive an education and earn a degree. While a college degree promises greater possibilities of social and economic advancement, these promises too often go unfulfilled. Low graduation rates, particularly among Black male athletes,



suggest that a poor education cannot compensate for an otherwise unfair financial exchange. Because students must take advantage of the educational opportunity afforded them, it is perhaps problematic to speak of an institutional promise; however, if an educational opportunity is unlikely to be realized based upon structural constraints and conflicts, or even with genuine effort expended on the part of the college athlete, the relationship indeed is exploitive.

An institutional commitment to big-time sports, and the corresponding commodification of college athletes, sets in motion a series of educational dilemmas, especially when colleges and universities disproportionately recruit and admit Black male college athletes for their revenue-generating teams. When these college athletes graduate at lower rates than teammates from other racial groups, the educational exchange between institutions and college athletes evidences and exacerbates racial inequities and social and cultural exploitation on college campuses. Such exploitation is particularly pronounced at predominantly White institutions, where Black male college athletes comprise a significant proportion of all matriculated Black male students on campus. These institutional decisions reinforce a race logic which celebrates Black athleticism and undermines Black academic achievement. The commodification of the Black athletic body displayed disproportionately in college football and basketball further substantiates these students' value to their college or university.

The role and place of intercollegiate athletics on a given campus, and how college athletes perceive their value to the institution, will certainly impact these students' relative sense of being exploited. When athletic departments are treated as auxiliary businesses, having to be financially self-sufficient and operate independently from central campus, institutions may inadvertently support the exploitation of their college athletes. The message is clear on two fronts: first, intercollegiate athletics may not be supported and valued within the core mission of the institution, or it is done so with ambivalence. Secondly, the few (e.g., revenue sports) must make money to support the many (e.g., non-revenue teams), if these non-revenue sports are not themselves self-sufficient through philanthropy. The projected surplus revenue from football and men's basketball must also, in large measure, defray the costs associated with running an intercollegiate athletic program.

This institutional decision often sets in motion the recruitment and admission of college athletes in the revenue sports who have tremendous athletic potential but, based on their high school records and standardized test scores, appear to have less academic potential. These students, who may already question their academic potential based upon their recruitment and admission to the university, reaffirm their primary value to the institution through their athletic performance. In turn, these college athletes come to feel commodified and celebrated as athletes, while they feel invisible and demeaned as students. These experiences are often exaggerated for Black male college athletes in predominantly White institutions, who are most commonly associated with, and celebrated for, exercises of the body rather than of the mind. As such, many college athletes feel resentful towards their institution and exploited for their athletic talents and abilities.

While this paper has briefly analyzed both Marxist and other neo-classical notions of exploitation, defining terms such as commodification, surplus value, alienation and marginal revenue product, there remain limitations to these analyses. The concept of marginal

revenue product, for example, focuses solely on economic inputs and outputs, quantifying the level of exploitation without any recommendation for remedying an unjust economic and social relationship. Marxism, particularly its later articulations such as Post-Marxism or Black Marxism, provides a more promising mode of analysis. And yet, more orthodox readings of Marx suffer from an epistemological and methodological myopia in which class analyses (and corresponding struggles) take analytic primacy over other identities or social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

Carrington (2009: 27) discusses the limits of orthodox Marxist analyses, proposing a cultural studies or critical approach to sport which engages in “scholarship that seeks both to make sense and to make a difference.” He writes that

such an approach ... will help towards more engaged analyses that appreciate sport's protean, dialectic nature as a site of everyday domination *and* resistance; a space of joy and creativity *and* routine mechanical existence. That is, to develop ways to conceptualize sport's potential for embodied emancipation and freedom but without any final guarantees as to its political effectivity (2009: 16).

In the realm of college sports, where the exploitation of college athletes, particularly Black revenue athletes, remains an educational and social problem, a purely economic analysis of labor masks the prevalent place of race in American higher education. As St Louis (2009: 119) argues, in proposing Black Marxism as a possible remedy to the Marxist/Post-Marxist impasse, “[w]hat is essentially at stake here is the form of social mapping and political project within which racialization and economic exploitation are to be located.” It is precisely this kind of approach which recognizes the need to problematize and expand current understandings of exploitation in college sports.

Based upon this exploration of exploitation in the academy, there is compelling evidence that a crisis of conscience exists within American higher education today. This crisis is most prevalent among those colleges and universities which promote the big business of college sports, despite the longstanding argument that participation opportunities provide the educational rationale for the very existence of intercollegiate athletics. Because of the inherent contradictions of capitalism, whereby the process of commodification can never be totally secure (Whannel, 2009), the current material and social conditions which have resulted in the institutional exploitation of college athletes also promise the potential for contestation and change, even if current conditions appear to preclude such possibilities.

The moral indignation associated broadly with the uneven distribution of wealth and power in American institutions has found its way into many colleges and universities who sponsor commercial sports entertainment and house expansive arenas and stadiums. Much of the public criticism leveled at these educational institutions has focused on the growing hypocrisy of big-time college sports and the institutional exploitation of their amateur student-athletes. It is due time that institutions treat college athletes, particularly Black male revenue athletes, as having value in and of themselves rather than as means to enhancing their school's public visibility and making money for athletic department coffers. An investment in intercollegiate athletics should always be reflected in an institution's full investment in its college athletes.

I began this paper wondering whether the needling narrative of the exploited college athlete had become a tired tale. My aim has been to tell a more fully developed story of exploitation in the American academy. The moral of the story, I hope, is that the moral actually matters.

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## Notes

1. College athletes can also produce negative value, in the form of bad press and public perception. The negative press may result from scandals associated with an athletic team or program, such as recruiting violations, overzealous boosters, academic fraud, or other negative byproducts of competing in college sports. Though there have been a few such scandals which prompted colleges and universities to end sponsorship of one or all of its varsity sports, the vast majority of institutions continue to promote college sports after such scandals have been reported and for which they have been penalized and publicly admonished.
2. The NCAA found violations of amateurism and recruitment in this case, blaming Newton's father, the owner of a scouting service, and an overzealous booster from Mississippi State for indiscretions, but cleared both Newton and Auburn University of any wrongdoing (NCAA, 2010a, 2010b). Ironically, Reggie Bush, who had won the Heisman five years earlier when he played for the University of Southern California (USC), relinquished his award in 2010 when the NCAA substantiated that major violations of amateurism had occurred, implicating Bush, his family, a sports agency and USC.
3. It is important to acknowledge that of the approximately 460,000 American college athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics any given year, there are only an estimated 30,000 Division I college football and basketball players (NCAA, 2008). And, according to the NCAA (2011), only 30% of Division I football and 26% of Division I men's basketball programs post revenues over expenses.
4. The National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Football League (NFL) benefit from the seasoning of aspiring professional athletes that takes place in college. College athletes test and improve their skills in this farm system, often creating a brand to be marketed once in the professional league. Age limits on when young men may formally enter these professional leagues ensures such seasoning and the corresponding profits earned by educational institutions as a result of the athletic performance of these prospective professionals.
5. NCAA amateur rules have historically dictated that member institutions cannot pay college athletes more than the subsistence wage of a full athletics grant-in-aid. The pressure to pay college athletes a fair wage has led to a lively discussion about the concept of subsistence. As noted earlier in this paper, the NCAA Division I board of directors recently passed a resolution which allows institutions to increase athletic scholarships by as much as US\$2,000 annually, based upon the full cost of attending school (Wieberg, 2011). The rationale for the increase suggests that this resolution, where enacted, will simply pay college athletes their actual subsistence wage or the *full cost* of attending school. As such, the resolution retains intact the problematic principle of amateurism.

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