

COMMENTARY

Why I Quit Yale Basketball at the Top of My Game



AP Images

The Yale men's basketball team last month made its first trip to the NCAA tournament in more than half a century (playing the Duke Blue Devils, above, in the second round). But the team played without its captain, who had been expelled based on accusations of sexual misconduct. Onaje Woodbine reflects on his own experience with the team, 16 years ago.

By Onaje X.O. Woodbine | APRIL 01, 2016

Basketball is not just a game. It is a microcosm of the social world. As such the sport legitimizes that world, maintains it, and has the miraculous power to transform it.

In the spring of 2000, after completing my sophomore season on the Yale University men's basketball team — a year in which I led the team in scoring and was voted one of the top 10 players in the Ivy League — I quit Yale basketball in order to change the way we think about and play basketball. My

decision to leave the team was the culmination of a long road from the rough streets of inner-city Boston to the Ivy League, one in which I discovered how often sports empowers white men and demonizes women, LGBTQ people, and people of color.

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Yale's recent appearance in the NCAA tournament — its first in more than 50 years — amid reports that its senior captain had been expelled for sexual misconduct (he has denied any wrongdoing), became a poignant reminder of this hidden underside of

defective in mind.

college basketball. I recalled with euphoria the time we beat Princeton University in double-overtime in front of a raucous crowd. But I also remembered the disgust I felt at being part of a Yale locker-room culture that encouraged misogyny, reveling in the sexual conquest and denigration of women.

Yale basketball's historic victory at the same time that its campus is struggling with racial unrest revived memories of racism on the team as well. During my freshman season, most of my white teammates were part of a fraternity to which none of the black players belonged. On the court and in the locker room there was a tacit racial divide: Black and white players rarely spent free time together, and some white players resented the inner-city style and passion I brought to the game.

No matter how well I played ball on the court, I began to realize that many of my white teammates and the larger, predominantly white campus would read my success through the prism of race. On the basketball court, they would perceive me as a typical black man, naturally gifted in body but equally defective in mind. I left Yale basketball, in part, because I did not want to remain in my culturally assigned "place" on campus.

Nevertheless, almost as soon as I said I was leaving the team, one of my white assistant coaches attempted to use my race to guilt me into rejoining it. In a lengthy email, he suggested that if I quit the Yale basketball team the admissions office would be less likely to "give" other "minorities" an opportunity to matriculate there. The implication was that Yale admitted its black students primarily on the basis of their athletic abilities. I was devastated by his note of white paternalism and wrote a lengthy response, demanding an apology and affirming my worth, first and foremost as a human being, and second as a student who had far more to contribute to Yale than my physical labor.

When I first joined Yale basketball I was naïve about the business of college athletics, where the primary motivation of university administrators and coaches is to profit from student-athletic labor. Part of my naïvete stemmed from the fact that I grew up in an impoverished black inner-city neighborhood, where coaches functioned as surrogate fathers and mothers, viewing the game as hallowed ground, within which we players

could express our stories. Even though my inner city coaches were often less educated, they saw hoops as an extension of our lives, in which players' deepest thoughts and everyday struggles played a significant role.

How ironic it was then to discover that at one of the greatest institutions of learning in the world, coaches built a tacit but impenetrable wall between athletics and the life of the mind, as if athletes checked their identities at the gymnasium door along with their jackets and hats. Yale coaches made no attempt to get to know me as a person beyond basketball, except when I decided to leave the team. There were no conversations regarding my academic life, no conversations about my personal background and no discussions about the cultural and social responsibilities that come with being a student-athlete at Yale.

Instead, players punched the clock each day as employees for the monetary benefit of administrators and coaches, and the obsessive focus on wins and losses seemed to numb the players' enthusiasm. Some of my teammates played basketball simply to pad their résumés. Meanwhile, back in my neighborhood, I witnessed young black men fresh from the penitentiary turn the game of basketball into a dance of freedom and heart, where the bounce of the ball, the rhythm of the music, the crossover dribble, had become a language to air deep-seated racial wounds and to address the agony of loss and death.

The experience of walking onto the asphalt, picking up a ball in sweaty hands, and moving one's body with others to rhythm and sound, can break open something human inside us that counters the effects of an oppressive and regimented culture. Even today, when I return to my old inner-city neighborhoods and watch young men and women playing their hearts out on the court, I am reminded of the responsibility that coaches have to be with young people in ways that encourage them to transform this sense of freedom into a more liberated consciousness of themselves and the world.

Sports are embedded within powerful impersonal systems that work to constrain colored, queer, and female bodies in the United States. But precisely because of this embeddedness, athletics has the power to challenge those systems. To foster healing on college campuses, sports teams in general and Yale University basketball in particular

must confront the myth that athletics are mere recreation, or worse, that they are untainted by sexual and racial violence.

Teams must acknowledge injustice as a fundamental dimension of athletics, thereby creating the opportunity for sports to become an arena for social change. Imagine if the Yale basketball team had run onto the hardwood wearing T-shirts with emblems against sexual abuse, and choreographed a warm-up dance designed to challenge rape culture. Imagine if coaches dedicated practice time to discussing gender, and sexual and racial violence, thus empowering players to identify with and speak up for the most marginalized students on campus.

Unlike teachers who get paid relatively little and serve large numbers of students, Division I college basketball coaches get paid millions of dollars to be responsible for a relative handful of student-athletes over the course of an entire academic year. And coaches often have the same players for more than one year. When will these coaches and the institutions they serve make a collective commitment to engage their student-athletes in a serious process of self-examination and social engagement on the playing field, preparing them to challenge our uneven past, and to imagine a more just future?

Onaje X.O. Woodbine, who holds a Ph.D. from Boston University, teaches philosophy and religious studies at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. He is the author of Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball, forthcoming in May from Columbia University Press.

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