

Emerging Writers

Volume 5

Article 11

2022

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Recommended Citation

Kwenda, Vongai (2022) "Being Black in Sports," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 5, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol5/iss1/11>

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Being Black in Sports

by Vongai Kwenda

When Thabo Sefolosa of the Atlanta Hawks and his teammate Pero Antic arrived at a club at 4:00 a.m., they could not have predicted what transpired afterward. Sefolosa, the half-Swiss and half-South-African shooting guard, witnessed an altercation on the streets that ended with a violent stabbing at the club entrance and police on the scene. The police told everyone to leave the club, and despite Sefolosa doing as the officer said, Sefolosa could not help feeling that he was being unfairly singled out though he was a bystander. Initially Sefolosa inquired why the police officer, who was white, was treating him harshly as though he had done wrong, but their verbal exchange quickly descended into discourteous retorts on both sides. The situation deteriorated when Sefolosa found himself surrounded by white officers who grabbed him, and violently forced him to the ground. Though Sefolosa was doing his best to cooperate, they kicked him and struck him with a baton while a woman in the background cried, “They [Sefolosa and Antic] didn’t do anything!” as Sefolosa calmly told the officers to “relax” (Penn). Limping and in hand cuffs, Sefolosa was led away. Though he later brought the police to court and won the case, the police had broken his leg and had prematurely ended his season and a title run, with his team depending on him (Penn).

America has come a long way from racial discrimination in the National Basketball Association (NBA), with racial integration breaking the colour barrier in 1950 (Gay). As with any sport, basketball serves as a unifying factor among Americans. Fans put their differences aside to enjoy the competitiveness and the ups and downs of the game on the backdrop of patriotism and a celebration of American values and freedoms. However, sports always tend to

reflect society, including its social issues. Like in the past, sports are filled with racially-charged incidents.

Even though sports stars appear to “live in a bubble,” sheltered from the financial hardships of life, they are still “reserved to the same standards of society” as everyone else (Young, “Revisiting the State”), including racism. They are susceptible to racial abuse from fans, discrimination from other players, and mistreatment at the hands of police. Also, sports commentators are perpetuating racism by inadvertently feeding racial tropes to sports viewers which negatively influence how they think of people of color. I will demonstrate how sports commentary includes racist undertones and discuss instances of racism in sports. This issue can be combatted by making commentators aware of their bias and its effect, dispelling any racial stereotypes they formed growing up, and having white fans and white sportspeople join people of color in condemning racism as it happens. With white fans making up nearly half of NBA fans and more than half of the National Football League (NFL) (57%), Major League Baseball (MLB) (60%), and National Hockey League (NHL) (61%) fanbase (Silverman), these fans sometimes need to hear from someone who looks like them on the topic of racism. Former basketball player, Kyle Korver, who is white, explains that “the fans in the arenas have a lot more in common with [him] than an African American player” (Young “It’s Like Being”). An occurrence of white support on the sports field happened once in the past, changing the course of racism in sports forever, so there is reason to believe it could happen again with reverberating results.

A Swing to the Past

There are many instances in the past where racism manifested. Incidences of racial discrimination included racial abuse of black players, exclusion of black players from leagues,

and hostility from white fans, coaches, and opponents. When black baseball legend Jackie Robinson first stepped foot in a ballpark for the Dodgers, the backlash at his emergence from the dugout was immense. His white teammates did not want to play with him, and fans and opposing players hurled racial epithets at him throughout the game. Robinson was brave and a talent. But it took more than his bravery and impressive play to ease the sports world of white America into integration. Dodgers manager, Leo Durocher, and Dodgers captain, Pee Wee Reese, both of whom were white, were instrumental in showing the league that it was okay for blacks to play baseball with whites. When Robinson's teammates threatened to sit out and not play because of him, Durocher "informed them that he would sooner trade them than Robinson" ("Jackie Robinson"). Robinson was the precursor to the NBA's color barrier break with Earl Lloyd, who did so for basketball in 1955 (Tagle). Still, this did not stop commentators from using language peppered with racist undertones during games. Some fans went so far as spitting on Lloyd, asking to see his tail, and telling him to go back to Africa ("First Black Player").



1. Even as a player, Durocher was unafraid of speaking up or going against the grain. Here he argues with an umpire ("Leo Durocher").

On a particularly rough day for Robinson at first base, which was close to the Cincinnati Reds fans, Pee Wee Reese put his hand up, walked over from shortstop to where Robinson was, put an arm around his shoulders, and "stared into the torrents of hate" saying nothing (Bennet). His action alone was a powerful public statement, symbolic of unity, and the rare case where a

white man had publicly stood up for what was right against people of his own race —something that had been missing in sports. Black people around America, including the Negro League players, were touched by this gesture and felt accepted. Blacks had been humanized.



2 Robinson and Pee Wee Reese: the powerful impact of an embrace (Bennet).

Sports Today

All sports have come a long way from racial discrimination and segregation. Today, players are unrestricted from playing in any sport and tend to enjoy an improvement in opportunities. They are admired and appreciated by all fans regardless of race. However, there is still the issue of modern racism and implicit bias, whose implications can be surprisingly damaging to the players themselves and society as a whole.

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd revitalized and intensified racial injustice activism that saw sports stars using their platforms to protest in an unseen phenomenon that contrasts the past. In the days of Jackie Robinson, black players were told to keep a stiff upper lip in the face of racial abuse and not react. However, in this age, it's a current trend for athletes to use their platforms to voice their disapproval of racial injustice. Colin Kaepernick, who is half-black, started taking the knee in protest during the US national anthem before NFL games and had many sportsmen and sportswomen around the world follow suit (Warren). Many fans, most of whom were white, understandably misunderstood his gesture to be an unpatriotic act and disrespect of the flag. The gesture also displeased the “shut up and dribble” fans who tend to see



black athletes as performers and performers alone who were stepping out of line. Unlike Kaepernick, Seth DeVale, who is a white American football tight end, also chose to take the knee. He took time to explain that he loved his national anthem and was “very grateful to the men and women who have given their lives [...] to protect [America]” and that the issue was that America didn’t “provide equal opportunity to everybody” (Chavez). Not only were black players taking a stand, but their white teammates were joining them. This sent a clear message to sports fans that racism is unjust and that racial equality is worth fighting for.



Though players protesting counts as a step forward in the right direction, the racial incidences in sports are similar in nature to the past but with the addition of a new mode of delivery: social media. The medium that the abuse is delivered through has evolved to include online spheres. When England lost in the final to Italy in the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Euro 2020 competition, three black English footballers faced racial abuse online after failing to convert their penalties in the final’s shootout. England had been

looking to end a long, 55-year wait for a trophy, so there was plenty of excitement and pent-up pressure (Brooks). Bukayo Saka, a budding talent and the youngest player on the team at just nineteen years old, was very distraught by his miss, which was the final kick of the match. Many were surprised the manager picked the youngster for such a decisive penalty in a highly important match. The abuse came in the digitalized age where messages are public, yet still personal. Saka was sent ape emojis, the n-word, “hate you,” and told to “get out of my country” on Instagram (Gallagher). After the UEFA Euro Finals, England’s football captain Harry Kane,

who is white, put out the right message after the black English players faced racial abuse online, saying to the racist abusers, “You aren’t England fans and we don’t want you” (Ouzia). This is important as young fans look up to the captain and are thus inclined to do as he says and does, making him a persuasive authority in such a situation.

Racial abusers don’t always hide behind anonymity and still use word of mouth to verbally spread racial bigotry or attack a sportsperson. In basketball, player Kyrie Irving of the Brooklyn Nets had a bottle thrown at him by a white fan in an incident that he later described as, “underlying racism and treating people like they’re in a human zoo” (“Fan arrested”). In a separate incident in MLB, baseball pitcher Jon Duplantier, who is black, received racial abuse as he was standing at first base. He heard an opponent say, “I got a rope and a tree with your name on it,” a reference to lynching. Duplantier said he “lost it instantly” and that he could not hold back the emotions that he was feeling at that moment (Ashame). Duplantier’s saving grace was that there was a black umpire who held him back telling him an altercation was not worth it. After the incident, Duplantier bemoaned that there was no dialogue on the issue whatsoever by his teammates, coach, or anyone else. Duplantier described that there was “nobody in [his] corner who [he] could voice what [he] was feeling on the inside to” (Ashame). This overt racism was eerily reminiscent of the past, hinting that there is still work to be done in mitigating racial abuse in stadiums and on court.

Though everyone makes assumptions every now and then about people who look different from them or come from different cultures, implicit bias and stereotyping in sports is perpetuating racism and is negatively impacting the images of black athletes. Implicit bias is also distorting fans’ perceptions of their favorite black athletes without their knowledge, leading them to incorrect conclusions about black people in general. Sports media journalists and

commentators treat black people and white people differently, and a technique called priming is cited as the means through which racism is rooted and spread to an audience. Priming happens when a color commentator—under pressure to speak unscripted and fill in silent moments during a live broadcast of a match—shares stories or insights that draw from stereotypes they formed early in their lives about black people (Duchess and Wheeler). A commentator’s biases inform his words when he engages in priming. Surveys have revealed that more than half of white respondents thought black people were more violent, less hardworking than white people, and less intelligent than white people. According to a Danish research firm that looked at soccer commentary, light skinned players had 62.60% of praise that aimed at their intelligence while 63.33% of criticism was aimed at darker skin toned players for intelligence (McLoughlin). When it came to physicality, commentators were 6.59 times more likely to be talking about darker players and 3.38 times more likely to be talking about darker players when discussing their speed (McLoughlin). Why does this racial stereotyping persist? Where do these tropes originate from?

The widely accepted belief that black people are naturally better than white people in sports is attributed to genetics. This belief is rooted in biological racism, which is now defunct and considered pseudoscientific. For instance, concerning speed, those who engage in othering black people often cite the gene called ACTN3 as the reason why black people are better at running than white people and are thus better in sports. However, studies in America show that both African Americans (96%) and white Americans (80%) have this gene (“How to Argue”). The gene is present in both black and white people, though there are small groups of both black people and white people without it. Thus, to suggest that ACTN3 is a superpower gene that is unique to black athletes is a logically flawed argument and a misapplication of the study on the gene. There are many factors that make someone good at sport such as flexibility, co-ordination,

the size of one's heart, the efficiency with which one absorbs oxygen, muscular recovery, determination, risk-taking, and concentration, according to Dr Rutherford ("How to Argue"). Stereotypes applied to black athletes like low intelligence and being much stronger than their white counterparts, both of which make black people appear more animalistic, make it easier for racist individuals to justify mistreating black people in various scenarios. Though the sports media has gone from overt racist forms to peppering their language with racial stereotypes and racial biases, this is how the media continues to perpetuate racism, and this hurts players of color and could leave deep, negative impressions on young sports fans.

A collage of commentary:

<h2>Black players</h2>	<h2>White players</h2>
<p><i>"That's a tough matchup for JJ Redick on the glass. Redick not known as a rebounder.</i></p> <p><i>Tasmin Mitchell much stronger, bigger and more athletic."</i></p> <p><i>"natural abilities"</i></p> <p><i>'Oh, Lamar Jackson, he can't survive running like that.'</i></p> <p><i>"God-given"</i></p> <p><i>'playground stuff'</i></p>	<p><i>We've talked about Matt Howard and how crafty he is, Jim. Scheyer is much the same way as a perimeter player. Knows how to use that height at 6' 5" very effectively to get into the lane.</i></p> <p><i>'gritty'</i></p> <p><i>"natural ballplayers"</i></p> <p><i>"It just looks different: [Brady] stands back there, he stands tall, he's looking downfield and it's just a different way to play the position than the guys who are coming in now."</i></p>
<p><i>Here comes streaky, sneaky Willie Veasley, a terrific offensive rebounder for his size, and he just weaseled his way to the basket.</i></p> <p><i>"thug"</i></p> <p><i>"I looked around the dugout and said, 'Can we have one of those?' That's what they look like."</i></p> <p><i>"Get a 40-acre field full of them,"</i></p>	<p><i>"Smart"</i></p> <p><i>"Genius"</i></p> <p><i>"hard-working"</i></p> <p><i>"cerebral"</i></p> <p><i>"leader"</i></p> <p><i>"brilliant"</i></p>

For my artifact, I have designed a collage of quotes from the sports commentary on black and white players from the NBA, the NFL, and the MLB. The black players' commentary collage features comments that highlight their strength, speed, and natural, "God-given" abilities. At surface-level, the labels seem to be complimentary, but a lot of the time, the labels are formed

from biological racism. There was also a reference to the “40-Acre and A Mule” promise made to slaves during the American Civil War that a commentator made directed at a black baseballer, intended as complimentary (Lambert). White players’ commentary features being cerebral, crafty, and hard-working. The collages illustrate the contrast in the words used for the two races. Commentators in the major leagues tend not to be overtly racist in their statements, but as the above image strives to portray, their comments are examples of coded language, the implicit bias perpetuating racism that, though subtle, has real world consequences. The collages allow sports fans to see the sneaky ways commentators oversimplify black players’ talent to genes and fail to acknowledge their smart play when it is due.

Looking Forward:

White players and fans must speak up in the moment of racial abuse or a racial incident. This sends the right message to young fans of any race who are impressionable and will do anything to be like their stars, even when it comes to speaking out against what isn’t right. This also sends the correct message to the abusers that they are a minority in the wrong that no one is allied to. It is a lot more impactful to have white players publicly denounce racism and stand up for a teammate being subject to it in the heat of the moment, because white voices have a far-reaching influence in some spheres that black voices do not, especially in white-majority countries. There needs to be more modern-day Pee-Wee-Reese moments where players act directly against racist fans. Players of color need to be ready to reciprocate in the case that the scenario is flipped in the future as reverse racism is gaining unforeseen traction at present. Commentators need to rid themselves of stereotypes by understanding what science says when it comes to race and strive to consciously describe black players more accurately instead of resorting to priming. If the racial situation in sports remains the same, then racial abuse, which is

on the increase, will continue to rise and people could hurt others, justifying horrific acts on the grounds of black inferiority and undoing the early efforts of racial justice.

There is hope. There have been donations to anti-racism funds and tighter enforcement of anti-racism rules in sports. Players are the hope of society. How they treat each other informs how the younger generation of sports fans will treat people who don't look like them. If white players condemn the racist chants in the stands as they happen during a live game, then which young fan watching the game will oppose their hero's actions? I challenge readers to be sports fans, sportsmen and sportswomen who speak out against racism *as it happens*, and to be aware of the sports commentary's bias. This bias distorts the abilities of black players, hurts the wider black population, and eventually hurts everyone. It is imperative that companies and individuals that decide to donate money to anti-discrimination funds do their research to ensure their money is going to a place they can trust is fighting for racial equality. The result will be more understanding and more peace among fans and players on and off the pitch regardless of their skin color.



Anti-racism: Soccer players are part of society's hope

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