

**SEX, VIOLENCE
&
POWER IN SPORTS**

RETHINKING MASCULINITY

**Michael A. Messner, Ph.D.
& Donald F. Sabo, Ph.D.**



The Crossing Press, Freedom, CA 95019



SEEN BUT NOT HEARD: IMAGES OF BLACK MEN IN SPORTS MEDIA

DON SABO AND SUE CURRY JANSEN

Race and gender politics often converge in complex and confusing ways, especially in sports and the sports media. But whereas studies of racial stereotyping and scapegoating, and their effects on members of stigmatized social groups, have occupied a prominent place in social science research since the 1930s, the role of racial stereotyping and scapegoating in maintaining the prevailing (hegemonic) definitions of masculinity in the U.S. has attracted little attention. Here we explore the race-gender nexus in sports by examining some widely used conventions for “framing” images of black males in the sports media.

Black males are, of course, highly visible in sports and sports media, but there has been little research or analysis on how blacks are being portrayed in sports media. Ralph Linton described stereotypes as “pictures in our heads.” Do the sports media reflect the “pictures” of

African American men that the white apologists for slavery and colonialism created centuries ago?

Many stereotypical traits commonly associated with black manhood—aggression, brute strength, and stupidity—are also associated with athleticism. The blending and blurring of images of black masculinity and athletic prowess in white consciousness became evident when Franz Fanon (1970) analyzed the free associations of white psychiatric patients. He found that the word Negro evoked characteristic responses, including “strong,” “athletic,” “potent,” “savage,” “animal.”

SYSTEMATIC NEGATIVE REPRESENTATION

Overtly and covertly, sports media contribute to racial stereotyping, some research indicates. Rainville and McCormick (1977) analyzed transcripts of twelve televised National Football League (NFL) games to explore the extent of racial prejudice in professional football commentators’ speech. They found that white players were praised more frequently than black players, and were more apt to be described as causal agents. Compared with blacks, whites also received more physical attributions (for example, “big John Smith”) and positive cognitive attributions (“Bailey is trying to figure out what to do on this one”). Blacks, compared with whites, received significantly more references to past failures (for example, academic probation in college) and were more often described as externally moved objects rather than as causal agents. The researchers concluded that while the announcers’ chatter helped build good reputations for white players, it cloaked black players with comparatively negative reputations. More recently, Derrick Jackson, of the *Boston Globe*, analyzed televised sports commentary on basketball and football in 1988 and 1989. Seven college basketball games were recorded, including three National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Final Four games as well as five NFL playoff games. Two university researchers were given transcripts of the commentaries; they had no knowledge of which comments were attributed to what players. They then classified all comments into four categories: “Brawn” (running, leaping, size, strength and quickness), “Brains” (intelligence, leadership, motivation), “Weakling” (lack of speed and size), and

“Dunce” (confused or out of emotional control). The results indicated marked stereotyping of blacks within the Brawn and Dunce categories:

- In football, 65 percent of all comments made about black athletes were in the Brawn category, as were only 17 percent of comments about white players.
- Black football players were 6 times more likely than whites to be classified as Dunces: 12 percent and 2 percent of comments, respectively, were in this category.
- 77 percent of the comments made about white football players fell into the Brains category, while only 22.5 percent of the comments about black players did so. The corresponding figures for basketball were 63 percent and 15 percent.

Margaret Duncan, Michael Messner, and Linda Williams (1990) studied the ways television commentators described athletes who participated in the 1989 NCAA women's and men's basketball finals and the 1989 women's and men's U.S. Open tennis tournaments. They found that commentators called female tennis players by their first rather than their full or last names 53 percent of the time, and men only 8 percent of the time. They also discovered that, of the men, only men of color were referred to by their first names only; full names were used to identify white male athletes. The researchers describe this overall pattern as a “hierarchy of naming,” that is, a linguistic vehicle for reinforcing status differences between men and women, whites and blacks.

These studies suggest that racial stereotyping in sports media not only stirs up white supremacist sentiments and reinforces racist beliefs, but also shores up prevailing beliefs about the meaning of masculinity itself. As Ralph Ellison (1964) observed, “The object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man.”

BODY POLITICS OF RACE

White America has traditionally viewed black men in primarily physical terms. As Eldridge Cleaver (1967) asserted, whites used the

myth of the black male as a “mindless supermasculine menial” to keep the slaves in their place and, later, to justify racial and occupational segregation. Ross Runfola (1980) argues that the adulation that highly successful black male athletes receive in white society not only encourages black males to “make it” with their bodies, but also allows whites to simultaneously block black men's access to the intellectual, political and economic sources of power and opportunity.

There is a political irony here. While the images of black men's bodies in sports media can empower the individual athlete, dissemination of these images in society at large may contribute to the collective emasculation and subjugation of black men. Black male athletes are extolled as manly men and good money-makers. Yet their immersion in the physical labor of sports reinforces supremacist assumptions that blacks are best suited to physical labor and not intellectual endeavors. In effect, media images of black men as physically adept and economically successful athletes tend to obscure blacks' and whites' historical relationship of oppression.

SOCIALLY STRUCTURED SILENCES

What is *not* said in sports media reveals as much or more about how gender and race politics unfold in the U.S. sports industry as what is said. A variety of socially structured silences surround black men in sports media. These silences cannot be explained as simple neglect or ghettoization of black male athletes. To the contrary, these silences are an integral part of the topography of American power relations.

Invisible Losers: Sports media do not ordinarily “cover” men who fail in sports or in life. Rather, they revel in those who succeed, or, for variation, in those athletes who have experienced failure in the form of injury, academic probation, drug addiction, incarceration, or delinquency, but who fight their way back to success. The has-beens, ne'er-do-wells, and quitters—in short, the real failures—seldom make the papers. “Rags to riches” stories in sports media far outnumber the “riches to rags” stories, like that of Henry Carr, a two-time gold-medal winner in the 1964 Summer Olympics and former defensive football

captain of the New York Giants, who retired because of knee injuries, to eventually obtain employment as a janitor and car cleaner for a dealer in Griffin, Georgia. And the spotlight seldom shines on the approximately 60 percent of the NCAA Division I scholarship athletes in football and basketball who fail to graduate after five years of college (Eitzen 1987; Molotsky 1989).

Physical injuries or diminished abilities often cut down many male athletes of color at a relatively early age. Even those who do succeed for a while in sports find that the social and economic rewards slip through their fingers upon retirement. Without any marketable skills or, for many, a formal education to fall back on, the final scenario is all too familiar for the really unfortunate ones: i.e., substance abuse, irregular employment, downward mobility and sometimes prison (Melnick and Sabo, 1993).

Invisible Injuries: Exploitative institutions pull people in, chew them up, and, when the people have lost their usefulness, spit them out again. For every young hero valorized on the screen, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of former athletes live with chronic pain and disability that result from injuries sustained during their "playing" days. In sports media, however, injury is often portrayed as a mark of manhood, a temporary obstacle for an athlete to overcome, or an unusual, unforeseen tragedy.

Injury is everywhere and nowhere in sports. The ubiquity of sports injury is evident in the lives and bodies of athletes who frequently experience bruises, torn ligaments, broken bones, aches, lacerations and muscle tears. Three hundred thousand football-related injuries per year require treatment in hospital emergency rooms. Yet sports media ignore the toll that sports injuries take on the bodies, psyches, and lives of male athletes.

Some of the gender and racial dimensions behind the media silences surrounding sports injury can be seen in recent portrayals of Muhammed Ali. On March 1, 1992, a two-hour-long tribute to the former boxer and "heavyweight champion of the world" was televised. A cavalcade of big-name celebrities combined their talent and popularity to create "Muhammed Ali's Fiftieth Birthday Celebration." Beneath

the glamor of the production, and behind Ali's very real athletic accomplishments, however, there lurked the reality that Ali has become severely disabled by a form of Parkinson's Disease caused by the repeated trauma his brain sustained in the ring. During the show Ali had difficulty shaking hands, and when he tried to raise his arms above his head as a gesture of unity with the applauding audience, he could not fully extend his arms. His speech was slurred, and at one point he strained to clap his hands but could not complete the movement. Ali's life as a rebel, a war protester, a Muslim minister, and a boisterous opponent of racism was rewritten via big-stage production numbers. Ali the victim was transformed into Ali the hero. Ignored was the fact that, ultimately, boxing had reduced Ali "the Greatest" to a stumbling, brain-damaged, middle-aged rich man who smiles into the cameras that follow and frame him.

Presence without Power: Blacks make up 60 percent of players in professional football, 70 percent in professional basketball, and 17 percent in professional baseball, and many participate in Olympic and intercollegiate sports. The high visibility of successful black men in sports fosters the impression that sports provide upward social mobility for African Americans. This impression, however, is not supported by the facts. The probability of an African American or other man of color gaining mobility through a professional sports career is extremely low. Only three thousand athletes, altogether, participate in major-league baseball, the National Basketball Association (NBA), the NFL, and professional boxing. Probably no more than twelve hundred African American and one hundred fifty other men of color play these professional sports in the United States today.

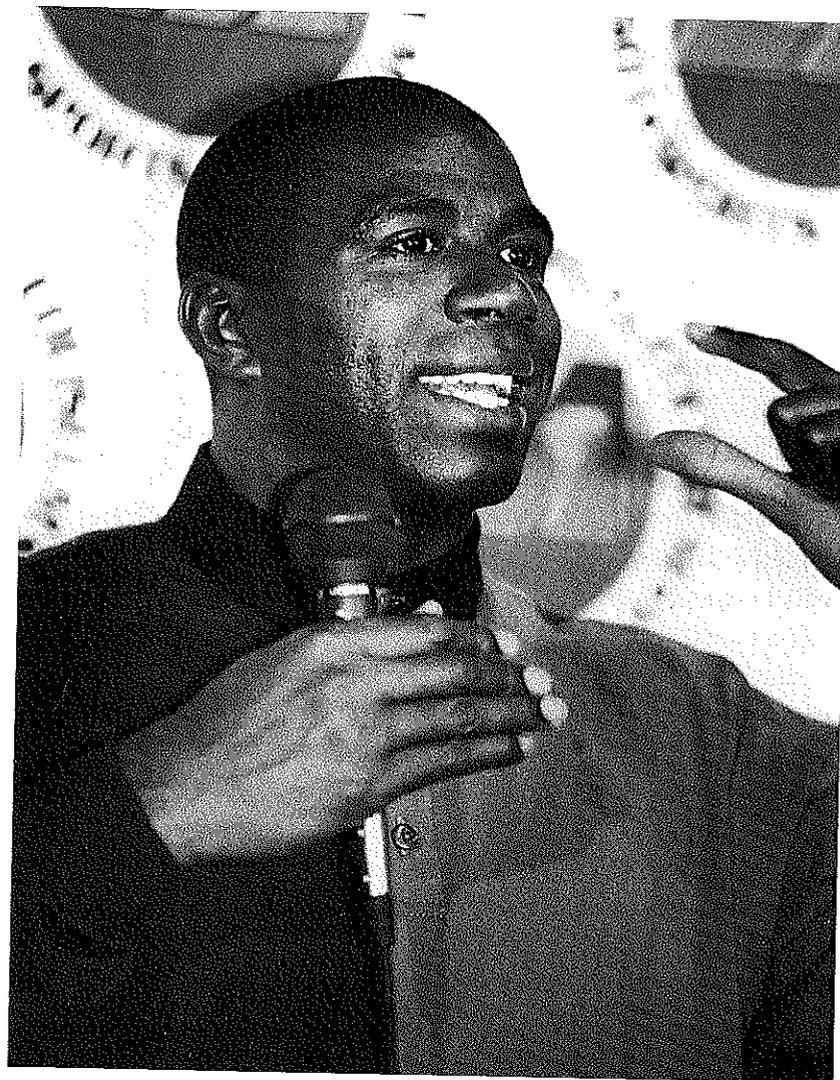
The image of the male athlete as celebrity is created, cultivated and amplified by the sports media. Whether black or white, the celebrity athlete exemplifies the self-fulfilled man who has won success, recognition and occupational achievement in the competitive and risk-laden American economy. Yet, because of racism, the successes of black and white athletes are perceived differently among class and racial subgroups. For example, bigoted whites, whose racial prejudices make them prone to overgeneralization about blacks, may be led to assume

that black men in general are faring better in the American economy than they really are.

Though blacks are generally more skeptical in their appraisals of opportunity and social mobility, many working-class and poor black males see sports as a way to prove their manhood and as a pathway out of the ghetto. Only a few, of course, achieve the dream while the majority continue to contend with the poverty and discrimination. Leonard and Reyman (1988) calculated the odds of a twenty- to thirty-nine-year-old African American male getting to play in the NFL at 1 in 47,600, an eighteen- to thirty-nine-year-old black man getting to play major-league baseball at 1 in 333,000, and a twenty- to thirty-nine-year-old getting to play in the NBA at 1 in 153,800. (For Hispanic males in the same age ranges, the respective odds are 1 in 2,500,000, 1 in 500,000 and 1 in 33,300,000.)

Though men of color are statistically overrepresented among professional athletes, they are very much underrepresented among coaches (only 7 percent of NFL and NBA coaches are men of color), managers (only 11 percent in major-league baseball are men of color), and front-office staff (8 to 14 percent are men of color) (Braddock 1989; Lapchick and Brown 1992). Despite the high percentages of athletes in these sports who belong to racial or ethnic minorities, minority representation among nonathletes in professional sports is disproportionately low.

Back of the Broadcasting Bus: Black sports journalists and radio and television commentators are also scarce commodities. Those who exist are more apt to be found on the sidelines or hanging around the locker-room door than co-anchoring with the middle-aged white men who prevail behind the microphones. The few blacks who do make it as TV and radio sports commentators usually adhere to established editorial policies and standard journalistic practices; and, except for rare special assignments, racial issues are not part of the sports reporter's beat. For example, sports commentators expressed no solidarity with Native American protests at games played by the Washington Redskins throughout the 1991 to 1992 football season; moreover, this silence prevailed in spite of the fact that some black players supported the Native American position (Lewis 1992).



The high media visibility of stars such as Magic Johnson contributes to the myth that sport is a vehicle for young African American males to achieve upward mobility. In fact, there are only about 1200 African American and 150 other men of color playing the main pro sports in the U.S. today.

MARKETING HEROES AND DEMONS

It is "business as usual" that keeps most black athletes in the back pages of the newspapers and away from the microphones and media markets. When black athletes do receive significant individual coverage, usually they are in sports that reinforce the old stereotype of black men as big, bad brutes (like sack-monster Reggie White), or they are embroiled in scandal (like Ben Johnson who used steroids), or, as in the case of Magic Johnson, their behavior away from the game imperils their performance or career. Seldom do we find sports media describing the intelligence, hard work, and discipline that are necessary for black (as well as white) athletes to produce peak performances. More often, sports media perpetuate the racist assumption that blacks who excel physically are just doing what comes naturally for them.

Sometimes media reports of sport scandals have racist overtones, such as in the case of Sugar Ray Leonard's drug abuse and wife-beating or Mike Tyson's rape trial as Messner and Solomon discuss in Chapter 2 of this book. Over several days' time, the media shifted focus from Sugar Ray Leonard as a battering husband to Leonard as a retired champion struggling to come back after a bout with drug abuse, thus diverting attention from the larger issue of men's violence against women and, more specifically, male violence in the black community.

Sportswriters examined "Iron Mike" Tyson's transgression from different angles—to explore precedents from the history of sport, to discuss Tyson's unsuitability for boxing, to analyze the athlete's life in and out of the gym, to review the legal implications of the case, to point out that Tyson was young and image-conscious, and so on (Saraceno 1991). The media gave the case so much coverage, of course, to attract the readers with "hot"—sensational and therefore very marketable—copy.

Giving Tyson so much attention, however, made him seem to be an anomaly, whether as cheat, imposter, or tragic victim of flawed judgment, or as a compulsive personality. By demonizing Tyson as a deviant hulk, the links between hegemonic masculinity, sexism, sports and violence against women remained hidden between the lines.

SOME CHANGES

Media stories about black male athletes are often framed in positive ways. Television coverage of athletic events often includes portraits of athletes that show them engaged in community work (these portraits are often done in conjunction with public relations plugs; for example, "The NFL supports the United Way in your community"). Similarly, coverage of intercollegiate athletic events sometimes highlights the academic achievements of black student-athletes by depicting them in laboratories or walking across campus with books in hand. These images do not say as much about athletes' lives and struggles in a racist society as they do about the image the NCAA or its university co-sponsors are trying to establish. Still, these images represent a move away from racial stereotypes and traditional portrayals of male athletes.

The grievances we have compiled here indicate that sports media play integral, not ancillary, roles in the larger social and cultural processes that perpetuate white men's domination over black men, and men's domination over women. Nevertheless, producers of sports media are becoming more conscious about the way they portray people. In some cases, they are not only working to eliminate racism from media, they are also projecting positive images of black men.

These moves may in part be responses to criticism from educators and activists, like the late Arthur Ashe, who deplored unrealistic, one-dimensional media representations of athletes as role models for young black males. Production of these positive images is also a pragmatic response by media organizations to the changing demographics of network television audiences, who are less white and less affluent than before.

Though the media moguls may be making these moves more because they have seen the numbers than because they have seen the light, they are still moves in the right direction.

REFERENCES

- Braddock II, J. H. 1989. "Sport and Race Relations in American Society." *Sociological Symposium* 9:53-76.
- Cleaver, E. 1967. *Soul on Ice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Duncan, M. C., M. A. Messner, and L. Williams. 1990. *Gender Stereotyping in Televised Sports*. Los Angeles: Amateur Athletic Foundation.
- Ellison, R. 1964. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House.
- Eitzen, S. D. 1987. "The Educational Experiences of Intercollegiate Student-Athletes." *Journal Sport and Social Issues* 11(2):111-35.
- Fanon, F. 1970. *Black Skins, White Masks*. London: Paladin.
- Jackson, D. Z. 1989. "Calling the Plays in Black and White." *Boston Globe*, January 22.
- Lapchick, R. E., and J. P. Brown. 1992. "Do Professional Sports Provide Equal Opportunities for All Races?" *1992 Racial Report Card* 4(#2:1):4-9. Boston: Northeastern University Center for the Study of Sport in Society.
- Leonard, W. M., II, and J. E. Reyman. 1988. "The Odds of Attaining Professional Athlete Status: Refining the Computations." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5:162-69.
- Lewis, C. 1992. "The Shy Kid Who Came to Visit Is More than a Football Hero." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 29.
- Malee, M. 1992. "Patriotic Symbols in Intercollegiate Sports During the Persian Gulf War." Unpublished paper, Department of Sociology, Boston College.
- Melnick, M., and D. Sabo. 1993. "Sport and Social Mobility among African-American and Hispanic Athletes." In *Ethnic Experiences in North American Sport*, ed. G. Eisen and D. Wiggins. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Molotsky, L. 1989. "Graduation Rate of Athletes Below 20 Percent at Many Schools." *The New York Times*, September 10.
- Rainville, R. E., and E. McCormick. 1977. "Extent of Covert Racial Prejudice in Pro Football Announcers' Speech." *Journalism Quarterly*. 54(1):20-6.
- Runfola, R. 1980. "The Black Athlete as Super-Machismo Symbol." In *Jock: Sports and Male Identity*, ed. D. F. Sabo and R. Runfola, 79-88. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Saraceno, J. 1991. "Tyson Indicted." *USA Today*, September 10.
- Weisman, J. 1992. "Sundays, Bloody Sundays: Pro Football—The Maiming Game." *The Nation* 254(3):84, 86-7.

DOING TIME DOING MASCULINITY: SPORTS AND PRISON

DON SABO

I am a white male college professor in my forties hunched over a desk in Attica Correctional Facility. My heart is pounding, my upper body is taut and shaking, and I am gazing into the eyes of an African-American prisoner who, like so many of the men in this New York state prison, comes from what sociologists call the underclass. We are different in most respects, but right now we are alike. Like me, he's puffing and straining, trying not to show it, sometimes cursing, and returning my gaze. We are arm wrestling. He puts me down after about two minutes, which, in arm wrestling, can be a long, long time.

I started arm wrestling in the joint, as I like to call it, about five years ago. I enjoy the physical connection with other men that the contest allows. The participants initially stalk one another over a period of days or weeks, keeping their distance, evaluating each other's strengths and weaknesses. Playful badmouthing