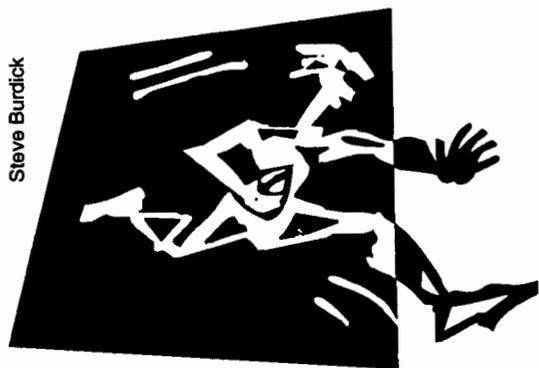


Seen But Not Heard: Images of Black Men in Sport Media

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Race and gender politics often converge in complex and confusing ways, especially in sports and the sport media. But while 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, their role in maintaining the prevailing (hegemonic) definitions of masculinity in the U.S. gender order as a whole 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 sport media.

Black males are, of course, highly visible in sports and sport media, but there has been little research and analysis on how blacks are being portrayed in sport media. Ralph Linton described



stereotypes as "pictures in our heads." Do the sport 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 activated by descriptions of 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 Caucasian psychiatric patients. He found that the word "Negro" evoked characteristic responses including "strong, athletic, potent... savage, animal."

Systematic Negative Representation

Some research indicates that sport media contribute to racial stereotyping overtly and covertly. 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 to blacks, whites also received more physical attributions (e.g., "big John Smith") and positive cognitive attributions ("Bailey is trying to figure out what to do on this one."). Blacks, compared to whites, received significantly more references to past negative professional achievements (e.g., academic probation in college) and were described more as externally moved objects rather than as causal agents. The researchers concluded that while the chatter of announcers built a positive reputation for white players, the black players were cloaked with a comparatively negative reputation.

More recently, Derrick Jackson of the *Boston Globe*, conducted a content analysis of 1988-89 televised sport commentary in basketball and football. Seven college basketball games were recorded, including three National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Final Four games as well as five NFL play-off games. Two university researchers were given transcripts of the commentaries; they had no knowledge of which comments were attributed to what players. All comments were then classified 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 negative categories:

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

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 women tennis players by their first names 53% of the time, and men 8% of the time. They also discovered that only men of color were referred to by their first names only; full names were used to identify white male athletes. The researchers suggest that this overall pattern displays 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/racist stereotyping in sport media is not only *systematic*, stirring up white supremacist sentiments and 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" in order to keep the slaves in their place and, later, to justify racial and occupational segregation. Ross Runfola (1980) argues that the cultural adulation black male athletes receive in white society not only encourages black males to "make it" with their bodies, but it also simultaneously allows whites to block men of color's access to the intellectual, political and economic sources of power and opportunity.

There is a political irony operating here. While the images of black men's bodies in sport media can be empowering at the level of the individual athlete, dissemination of these images in the larger culture may contribute to the collective political emasculation and subjugation of black men. On one side, black male athletes are extolled as manly men and viable economic agents. Yet, their symbolic immersion in the physical labor of sport reinforces supremacist assumptions that blacks are best suited to physical labor and not professional endeavors. In effect, media images of black men as physically adept and economically successful athletes tend to obscure and confuse the oppressive historical relationship between whites and blacks in American society.

Socially Structured Silences

What is *not* said in sport media reveals as much or more about how gender and race politics unfold in the U.S. sports industry as *what is said*. In this regard, a variety of socially structured silences surround black men in sport media.

These socially structured silences cannot be explained in terms of simple neglect, or ghettoization of black male athletes. To the contrary, these socially structured silences are an integral part of the topography of the larger field of American power relations.

Invisibility of Losers: Sport media do not ordinarily "cover" men who fail to measure up in sport or life. Rather, they revel in those who succeed, or as a variation in those failed athletes who have fought their way back from adversity such as injury, academic probation, drug addiction, incarceration or delinquency. The has-beens, ne'er-do-wells and quitters—in short, the failures—seldom make the papers. "Rags to riches" stories in sport media far outnumber the "riches to rags" stories, like that of Henry Carr, a two-time gold medal winner in the 1964 Summer Olympic Games and former defensive football captain of the New York Giants, who retired because of knee injuries. He eventually obtained employment as a janitor and car cleaner for a dealer in Griffin, Georgia. And the spotlight seldom shines, for example, on the approximately 60% 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 and/or diminished abilities often cut down many minority male athletes 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 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).

Framing Injury and Victims: Exploitative institutions pull people in, chew them up, and when they have lost their usefulness, spit them out again. For every young hero valorized on the screen, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of former athletes living with chronic pain and disability that resulted from injuries sustained during their "playing" days. In sport media, however, the acceptance

of injury is often portrayed as a mark of manhood, temporary obstacles for athletes to overcome, or a sad tragedy that is the exception rather than the rule.

Injury in sport is everywhere and nowhere. The ubiquity of sports injury is evident in the lives and bodies of athletes who regularly experience bruises, torn ligaments, broken bones, aches, lacerations and muscle tears. There are about 300,000 football-related injuries per year that require treatment in hospital emergency rooms. What does not get treated and probed in sport media is the toll that sports injuries take on the bodies, psychologies 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 fused their talent and pop status to create "Muhammed Ali's 50th Birthday Celebration." Beneath the glamour of the production, 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 that was caused by repeated trauma to the brain that he 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 connection with the applauding audience, his arms could not achieve full extension. His speech was slurred, and at one point he strained to clap his hands but could not negotiate the movement. Ali's life history as a rebel, a war protester, a Muslim minister, 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-injured, middle-aged rich man who smiles into the cameras that follow and frame him.

Presence Without Power: In America, black men are highly visible and successful at sport. Blacks comprise 60% of players in professional football, 70% in professional basketball, 17% in professional baseball, as well as widely participating in Olympic-level and intercollegiate sports. The high visibility of successful black men in sport fosters the belief that sport is a vehicle for African Americans to achieve upward social mobility. This impression, however, is not supported by the facts. The probability of African Americans and other men of color to derive upward mobility gains from a professional sports career is extremely low. There are only about 3,000 athletes altogether participating in major league baseball, the National Basketball Association (NBA), the NFL and professional boxing. Indeed, there are probably no more than 1,200 African American and 150 other men of color playing professional sports in the U.S. today.

The image of the male athlete-celebrity is created, cultivated and amplified by sport media. Whether black or white, he exemplifies the self-fulfilled man who has won success, recognition and occupational achievement within the competitive and risky world of the American economy. Yet, because of racism, it is likely that the successes of black and white athletes are perceived differently across class and racial subgroups. For example, bigoted whites whose racial prejudices make them prone to overgeneralization, may be led to assume that black men, as a whole, are faring better in the American economy than they really are.

Though blacks are generally more skeptical in their appraisals of equal opportunity and social mobility, many working class and poor black males see sport as a way to prove their "manhood" and as a pathway out of the ghetto. Only a few, of course, will achieve the dream while the majority will continue to contend with the harsh economic conditions and structural constraints. With respect to men of color, Leonard and Reyman (1988) calculated the odds of a

20-39-year-old African American male playing in the NFL at 1:47,600, an 18-39-year-old playing major league baseball at 1:333,000, and a 20-39-year-old playing in the NBA at 1:153,800. (For Hispanic males in the same age cohorts, the respective odds are 1:2,500,000, 1:500,000 and 1:33,300,000.)

Though men of color are statistically overrepresented among professional athletes, they are very much underrepresented among coaches (7% in the NFL and NBA), managers (11% in major league baseball) and front office staff (8-14%) (Braddock, 1989; Lapchick and Brown, 1992). Given the high percentages of racial and ethnic minority athletes in these sports, minority representation in non-athletic positions is disproportionately low.

Back of the Broadcasting Bus: Black sports journalists and electronic media commentators are also scarce commodities. When they are present, they are more apt to be 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 often 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, there were no expressions of solidarity from black sports commentators for the Native American protests against racism that occurred throughout the 1991-1992 football season at games played by the Washington Redskins; moreover, this silence prevailed in spite of the fact that some black players supported the Native American position (Lewis, 1992).

Marketing Heroes and Demons

It is "business as usual" that keeps most black athletes in the back pages and away from the microphones and media markets. When black athletes do receive significant amounts of individual coverage it is usually in sports that reinforce old stereotypes of black men as big bad brutes like sack-monster Reggie White; or because they are embroiled in scandal, like Ben Johnson's steroid use; or, as in the case of Magic Johnson, because behavior away from the game imperils their performance or career. Seldom do we find sport media profiling the intelligence, hard work and discipline that are necessary for black (and white) athletes to produce peak performances. More often, the framing devices of sport media implicitly reproduce the racist assumption that blacks who excel physically are just doing what comes "naturally."

Sometimes sport scandals emerge in the media with covert racial overtones such as the Sugar Ray Leonard case or the Mike Tyson rape trial. In issue #25 of *Changing Men*, Michael Messner and Bill Solomon analyzed how sport media interpreted disclosures that Sugar Ray Leonard had abused drugs and physically brutalized his wife, Juanita. They show how, over time, the media shifted focus from Leonard as a battering husband to Leonard as a retired champion struggling to come back after a bout with drug abuse. By recasting Leonard's actions as a "redemption from drug abuse" story, the media diverted attention from the larger feminist issue of men's violence against women and, more specifically, concerns about male violence in the black community. The cultural equations between athleticism and masculinity were also left unscathed.

As regards "Iron Mike" Tyson, sports commentators used crisis frames to examine the 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 he is young and image conscious, and so on (Saraceno, 1991). The media's rationale for this extended coverage is, of course, to meet the demand of readers for "hot," sensational and therefore very marketable copy. In short, it is a "business (as usual) decision."

However, the coverage also has the effect of rescuing hegemonic masculinity by framing the transgressor as an anomaly, whether as cheat, imposter or tragic victim of flawed judgment or of a compulsive personality. By demonizing Tyson as an deviant hulk, the links between hegemonic masculinity, sexism, sport and violence against women remained hidden between the lines.

Some Changes Seen

Black male athletes are often placed in positive frames by sport media. It is common practice for television coverage of athletic events to present social portraits of athletes that show them engaged in community work. These portrayals are often done in conjunction with public relations agendas (e.g., the NFL or the NBA support 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 institutional image-making of the NCAA or their university co-sponsors. Still, these images attempt to move away from racial stereotypes and traditional portrayals of male athletes.

The catalog of grievances we have compiled here indicates that sport media play integral, not ancillary, roles in the larger social and cultural processes that reproduce and exonerate white men's domination over black men, and men's domination over women. Nevertheless, there are some indications that producers of sport media are becoming more self-conscious about their representational practices. In some cases, they are not only making pro-active moves to eliminate racism from media, they are also projecting positive images of black men.

These moves may be responses to criticism from educators and activists, like the late Arthur Ashe who deplored unrealistic and unidimensional 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—less white, less affluent—of network television audiences.

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

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