



Burdened with Glorious Purpose: Racialized Performance Expectations for African American Student-Athletes at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities

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The current discussion highlights circumstances and certain dynamics that shape attitude and performance expectations of African American student-athletes at PWIs. Research on the topic is limited, but some suggest that African American student-athletes competing in revenue producing sports like football and basketball at the NCAA Division I level may experience greater athletic performance expectations than do their non-African American counterparts. It should be noted that while African American student-athletes at PWIs and HBCUs face unique challenges, the nature and impact of racialized performance expectations are thought to differ significantly. HBCUs tend to have a more holistic approach within a culturally affirming environment. In contrast, PWIs may place greater emphasis on athletic performance, which may be influenced by prevailing racial stereotypes and the commercial nature of division I collegiate sports. Implications for sport social work are discussed, and culturally competent sport social work practice is highlighted.

Keywords: sport social work, African American, student-athlete, performance, college, athletics, mental health

The racial integration of college athletics in the United States occurred gradually and has been marked by significant challenges and resistance. Since that time, the African American student-athlete has become a prominent figure in the college athletics landscape (Harrison et al., 2017). This prominence has been the result of various factors including resilience, and changes in social and legal norms (Wiggins, 2016). Early pioneers like Jack Trice at Iowa State College (now Iowa State University) demonstrated courage and resilience in breaking the color barrier in college athletics. This has allowed subsequent generations of African American athletes to pursue college athletics at predominantly white colleges and universities (PWIs)

The Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th century played a crucial role in challenging racial segregation and discrimination throughout the United States, including that which occurred in organized sports (Davis, 2007). The Civil Rights Movement contested the framework for segregation on a societal level and advocated for racial integration and equality (Jackson, 2013). The impact of the Civil Rights movement extended to public colleges and universities, including athletic programs (Freedman, 2013). Social milestones, such as Perry Wallace becoming the first African American basketball player in the Southeastern (SEC) in the 1967-68 season was a demonstration of the Civil Rights Movement's broader desegregation efforts across college sports.

Further, in 1972, Title IX was passed into federal law. This legislation prohibits sex-based discrimination in education, including athletics. Although Title IX was designed primarily to address gender inequity, its implementation has had broader implications for diversity in college sports. This includes opportunities for athletes from underrepresented groups (Sangree, 1999).

Over time, and because of the Civil Rights movement, societal attitudes have evolved, thus leading to greater acceptance of racial diversity in college athletics (Clopton & Bourke, 2011). This perhaps suggests that people have come to recognize the value of diverse perspectives and backgrounds within college athletics. While the integration of college athletics may have been a function of social justice efforts such as the Civil Rights movement, there is also historical evidence to suggest that the acceptance of African Americans at (PWIs) may instead be linked to a given institution's misguided belief in the "*Black athlete stereotype*" and the desire for those institutions to be more competitive in the athletic arena (Moskowitz & Carter, 2018).

To be sure, athletics are designed by nature to be competitive. Thus, there is nothing egregious about institutions seeking to become competitive. However, seeking to do so based on lofty albeit misguided expectations associated with the "*Black athlete stereotype*" is potentially damaging and poses a threat to the mental health and well-being of those who have such expectations thrust upon them.

The "*Black athlete stereotype*" puts forth the idea that African Americans possess natural physical abilities that allow them to excel in athletics, particularly football, basketball, and track & field. To be sure, there is a historical legacy that has contributed to the perpetuation of this stereotype. Theories about the innate physical abilities of African Americans were first published in the 1800s (Stone et al., 1999). Such theories were attempts to explain why African American athletes were able to outperform White athletes in sports previously dominated by majority group members. The consensus was that "*Blacks were physically different from Whites and possessed an accompanying character and temperament that was unique to their species*" (Wiggins, 1997, p. 313).

To be sure, the stereotype of the "*black athlete*" oversimplifies the diversity of talents, abilities, and work ethic of African American athletes. Additionally, the "*black athlete*" stereotype perpetuates harmful assumptions and contributes to the commodification of African

American student-athletes. This is perhaps illustrated when college / university athletic programs steer African American athletes towards less rigorous academic paths to maintain eligibility. Doing so not only undermines the student-athletes' educational development but further perpetuates the stereotype that their primary if not sole value is athletic (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Such was the case in 2014 when African American student-athletes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were found to have been enrolled in fake classes to maintain their eligibility to play sports. As such African American student-athletes were exploited for their athletic abilities while their educational development was compromised, once again reinforcing the stereotype of athletes being valued for their physical skills and abilities (Smith & Willingham, 2019).

The proverbial debate over "*black athleticism*" has continued well into the twentieth century and may in some ways have served as a likely catalyst for the racial integration of college athletics (Olsen, 2020). Once again, colleges and universities perhaps opted to test the "*black athlete*" theory to increase the competitiveness of their athletic programs (Lewis et al., 2020). However, in the world of college athletics, it would seem this test has quickly become an expectation. An expectation that has resulted in differing realities for African American student-athletes. That is, while the demands of being a student-athlete are rigorous to be sure, for African American student-athletes, those demands may be influenced by racialized performance expectations derived from the "*black athlete*" stereotype.

The notion of the "*black athlete*" theory to increase competitiveness of college athletic programs is evidenced by former Major League Baseball player Reggie Jackson recounting an experience he had with then University of Alabama Head Football Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant. According to Jackson, *"I was getting changed, finishing a shower, and putting my shirt on, and Bear Bryant walked up to me and paid me a compliment. 1967."* *"[Bryant] said to the group, 'This is just the kind of [N-word] boy we need in order to compete with Bo [Schembechler], Woody [Hayes], Ara [Parseghian], and Johnny [McKay]..."* Those names referred to the then-head coaches of University of Michigan, Ohio State University, Notre Dame, and the University of Southern California, respectively. Each of these universities had racially integrated football teams. Yet, major Southern universities had yet to integrate.

As it pertains to the "*black athlete*" stereotype, it should be further noted that this was/is not just a theory that explains African American athletes outperforming majority group members, but also a metaphor that aligns with a broader phenomenon of cultural of discrimination against African Americans. This has resulted in a peculiar duality which regards African American athletes as subhuman and superhuman simultaneously. Over-emphasizing physical ability feeds into the widely adopted belief that rather than being dedicated, committed, and possessing a profound work ethic, African Americans are instead "animalistic, uncultivated, less intelligent, and lazy".

The current discussion represents an important area of exploration for research and practice with athlete populations. That is, as awareness of athletes as a uniquely at-risk and vulnerable population increases, it is important to examine the various dynamics within this population that may heighten risk and vulnerability and in turn adversely affect mental health

outcomes. Race/ethnicity is well established as being linked to a host of differential psychosocial outcomes (Fothergill et al., 1999; Cogle & Grubaugh, 2022). However, less is known about race-based athletic demands and expectations for student-athletes, particularly those at PWIs and how this may affect personal identity development, mental health and overall well-being.

This discussion explores the differing athletic expectations for African American student athletes at PWIs compared to their white counterparts. It is argued herein that these racialized expectations are thought to exact a toll that impacts the lived college athletic experience for African American student-athletes. This “toll” is believed to have strong implications for personal identity (Howe, 2020), mental health (Wilkerson et al., 2020), and overall well-being (Ballesteros et al., 2023).

Black Athletes and Social Darwinism

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, eugenics was the principal philosophy used in attempts to explain physical differences across race/ethnicity (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Briefly, eugenics is the study of how to arrange human reproduction to increase the likelihood of heritable characteristics regarded as desirable. However, this ideology has been discredited as unscientific and racially biased after adoption of its doctrines by the Nazis to justify their treatment of Jewish, disabled persons, and other minority groups (Caballero & Aspinall, 2018).

As it pertains to the African American athlete, evidence of discriminatory beliefs based on presumed biological differences dates to the early 20th century. Madison Grant, who wrote "The Passing of the Great Race" in 1916, espoused ideas that were later used to support discriminatory views of athletic abilities based on race. Grant put forth a theory of Nordic superiority, claiming that the "Nordic race" was inherently superior to other human "races". To be sure, these arguments lacked scientific validity and were largely influenced by racist beliefs. Over time, scientific inquiry has evolved, and evidence suggests that there is no inherent biological basis for racial superiority or inferiority including that of athletic abilities (Kerr, 2010).

Despite scientific evidence debunking the stereotypical myth of the black athlete, explanations for why Black athletes seemingly dominate some sports, or appear to play sports differently than White athletes continued to be debated in the 20th century. In 1971, Sports Illustrated senior editor Martin Kane in an article titled "An assessment of “Black is best” argued that Black athletes have superior physical abilities that can be attributed to a form of Social Darwinism. Kane asserted that the average Black man possesses superior physical qualities because the hardship of slavery "weeded out" those who did not possess adaptive physical characteristics (Wiggins, 1989).

Promoting the Black athlete stereotype

These ideas have perhaps been further proliferated by media coverage which often reinforces stereotypes of African American athletes possessing innate physical talents rather than

owing their success to dedication, hard work, and skill development (Edwards, 1971; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Olsen, 2020). African American athletes have at times been treated as entertainers, particularly in sports where physical prowess was highlighted. This includes hyper-visibility. That is, some African American athletes who achieve success receive a disproportionate amount of media attention. This in some ways contributes to the perception that African American athletes *should* excel in sports (Runstedtler, 2018). To be sure, recognition can be positive, yet it may also create a skewed view of the broader African American athletic community.

Along with hyper-visibility comes the exaggeration of athleticism. The media often overemphasizes the physical attributes and natural talents of African American athletes, thereby reinforcing the belief that their success is primarily a function of genetic factors rather than hard work and dedication (Haslerig et al., 2020). In sum, factors such as these have contributed to the perception that the success of African American athletes is based more on natural ability than training and discipline (Ash et al., 2023).

To be sure, African American athletes have gained prominence and success in certain sports (e.g., football, basketball, baseball, track & field). This prominence and success, combined with existing stereotypes, has perhaps reinforced the notion, albeit erroneous, that African Americans are somehow naturally more adept in these areas of athletics (Van Rhee, 2019). Moreover, the media's use of monikers like "*Beastmode*" or "*Half man Half amazing*" have added an air of sensationalism that further embeds stereotypical notions of black athleticism into the collective sports consciousness (Hall, 2001; Hoberman, 1997). Further, this sensationalism has perhaps served as an impetus for PWIs to begin recruiting African American athletes for their athletic programs. However, it should be noted that these recruitment efforts initially occurred within the context of segregation (Demas, 2007). Opportunities for African American athletes were limited, and they faced barriers accessing the same educational and athletic resources as their white counterparts.

Although significant progress has been made, challenges and disparities still exist in college athletics and sports in general. Efforts to address these issues and promote inclusivity continue. Nonetheless, the strides of African American student-athletes remain a testament to the positive change that has occurred over the years in college athletics.

Different Expectations, Different Realities

The racial integration of college athletics may be regarded as a reflection of broader racial progress in the United States (Hawkins, 2010). That is, the integration of college athletics, particularly in the context of the desegregation of schools and universities, was a significant milestone in the larger struggle for civil rights. Further, as it pertains to college athletics, it is important to recognize that despite this significant milestone, racially biased attitudes and beliefs have played a key role in the differential experiences of African American athletes.

A host factors may contribute to the expectations placed upon African American athletes, particularly those competing at PWIs. This may range from stereotype threats and racial

stereotypes to limited diversity of narratives and public pressure. Briefly, stereotype threat refers to the concern that one's actions will confirm a negative stereotype about their racial or ethnic group. This perceived threat can lead to added pressure, anxiety, and higher expectations of performance (Bullock et al., 2020). In the context of African American student-athletes competing in college athletics, stereotype threat can play a significant role in shaping their experiences and the expectations placed on them (Winston, 2019).

Further, racial stereotypes about the natural athletic ability of African Americans can lead to the perception of some that they have a genetic advantage in sports. As such, this may result in higher performance expectations, along with the assumption that as an African American, they *should* excel in athletic endeavors. Lastly, limited diversity of narratives refers to the limited range of narratives and stories for African American athletes, such as those highlighting adversity or exceptionalism (Nwadike, 2020). This narrow focus can lead to unrealistic and erroneous assumptions that all African American athletes follow a similar path.

Psychological Impact of Differential / Racialized Expectations

The psychological impact of the external pressures and demands experienced by African American student-athletes competing at PWIs can be significant (Cooper & Dougherty, 2015; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013). These athletes may experience a range of emotions, including feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, guilt, and even anger (Bennett, 2022). Many African American student-athletes may feel expected to effectively manage multiple roles including that as an athlete, a student, and as a representative for their family, community, or even race. All this while also navigating racial microaggressions from coaches, teammates, and opponents (Lewi et al., 2021; Haywood & Payne, 2017). This in turn may lead to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and a lack of sense of belonging (Lewis et al., 2021; Beamon, 2014).

To further contextualize this phenomenon, many African American student-athletes may come from low-income backgrounds. And so, socioeconomic challenges, family and community expectations, and societal issues may further add to the psychological burden of differential / racialized expectations of being an African American student-athlete at a PWI. As such, some African American student-athletes may internalize these expectations and thereby increase their vulnerability for poor mental health outcomes.

Counting the costs of Differential / Racialized Expectations

To be sure, the differing, if not racialized expectations of African American student-athletes at PWIs can exact a psychological, emotional, and social toll that stems from the associated pressures and stereotypes. Heightened expectations may lead to increased pressure to perform at a consistently high level. Ultimately, this may result in elevated levels of stress and anxiety, which can have detrimental effects on mental health and well-being (Wilkerson et al., 2022).

Differential expectations may also be detrimental to personal identity and self-concept. That is, some African American student-athletes at PWIs may feel that their worth as an

individual is solely contingent upon their success as an athlete. This in some instances can lead to social isolation wherein one may come to believe that they are valued solely for their athletic abilities, rather than other personal qualities and attributes. The challenge presented by differential / racialized expectations may cause some African American student-athletes at PWIs to question whether they are being true to themselves or simply fulfilling others' stereotypical notions and expectations.

The Hopes and Dreams of All Those Who Came Before

The burden on African American athletes may be seen as a reflection of the larger collective experience of African Americans. Both the group and the sub-group face similar societal challenges, including discrimination and racism. African American athletes, like African Americans in general, are often held to a different, sometimes unfair standard, and are expected to perform at a higher level to be considered successful (White, 2015). Additionally, African American athletes, like African Americans in general, are often judged more harshly for their mistakes or failures (see Heitzeg, 2016). As such, some African American student-athletes may feel a heightened sense of duress to fulfill expectations. This too can lead to difficulty coping and ultimately have an adverse effect on mental and emotional well-being.

From a practitioner's standpoint, effectively addressing the psychological and emotional tolls that are exacted from African American student-athletes is essential for their well-being and success. College and university and athletic programs must provide viable support systems, that include mental health resources, mentorship programs, and diversity and inclusion initiatives. Coaches and educators should be cognizant of the unique challenges these athletes may face and work to create an inclusive and equitable environment that recognizes their full humanity, individual strengths, and aspirations beyond athletics.

This includes increased awareness, acknowledgement, and open dialogue surrounding these issues. Doing so is crucial for challenging and changing the underlying stereotypes and expectations that contribute to the psychological, emotional, and social incumbrance placed on African American student-athletes, particularly those at PWIs.

To be sure, the competitive atmosphere of college athletics can lead to a range of mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Xanthopoulos et al., 2020). Thus, it is vital for sports social workers, coaches, and other athletic support staff to be cognizant of this and to provide appropriate support mechanisms for African American student-athletes to help them cope with the external demands of competing at the NCAA Division 1 level.

Name, Image and Likeness: Upping the Ante?

The United States Court of Appeals Ninth Circuit ruling in *O'Bannon v. NCAA* (2015) was a major departure from previous legal challenges to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA's) position on amateurism. The court's decision essentially ratified name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights for college athletes. That is, it created a foundation for the passage of legislation at the state level, to permit college athletes to profit from their NIL. This

created financial opportunities for college athletes who have historically been exploited by their respective institutions and the NCAA (Fresh, 2022). Although this legislation applies to athletes across all competitive athletic divisions, much of the discourse related to NIL has focused primarily on NCAA Division 1 athletics, perhaps most notably in football and basketball.

Given the advent of the NIL era, researchers and practitioners must now carefully examine both the implications and ramifications of NIL for the student-athlete. In this regard, a potential complication related to NIL may be that of role conflict and/or confusion. That is, some athletes may experience psychological, emotional, or social difficulties performing a particular role due to the requirements and demands of additional roles and responsibilities (Fridley et al., 2023). Thus, NIL may further complicate the role / identity dynamic by introducing a new role that has the potential to monopolize a student-athletes' time and energy.

To be sure, the NIL phenomenon has the potential to place greater pressures, expectations, and demands on African American student-athletes competing at PWIs (Bartlett, 2022). African American student-athletes are disproportionately represented in revenue-generating sports such as football and basketball. As such, there may be increased pressure for them to perform well enough to secure potentially lucrative NIL opportunities and thereby creating economic stability for themselves and their families (Hollabaugh et al., 2022).

It's important to note that the NIL phenomenon is still evolving and the extent to which it may place greater social, emotional, and psychological pressure on student-athletes is still uncertain. However, to ensure that the overall health and well-being of the student-athlete is protected, it is crucial that the NCAA and other stakeholders consider the potential impact this may have on student-athletes, particularly those from disadvantaged or marginalized communities.

Sport Social Work

To effectively assist African American student-athletes cope with the external pressures and demands of competing at the NCAA Division 1 level, social work practice methods should be adapted in a culturally competent and culturally responsive manner. Sport social workers can help these students identify and understand their emotions, recognize how they are impacted by race-related stressors, and develop effective coping strategies (Henderson et al., 2021). Additionally, sport social workers can provide education and awareness about mental health issues such as anxiety or depression that are likely to result from the pressures of being a student-athlete at this level. Finally, sport social workers can advocate for increased access to resources for African American student-athletes on campus, such as academic support and mental health services. To be sure, these are critical roles and functions for social workers within college / university athletic programs and the larger athletic context.

A special population? A recent study by the NCAA indicates that insomnia, mental exhaustion, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed are common mental health concerns for student-athletes (NCAA, 2023). This is likely due in part to performance expectations, rigorous schedules and time commitments, as well as social and institutional pressures. (Rice et al., 2016). This would seem to suggest that NCAA student-athletes are a uniquely at-risk and vulnerable

population (Hamstra-Wright et al., 2024). Sport social workers are well positioned to provide service to this population and complement the athletic context (Bennett, 2023).

While generally student-athletes may be thought to represent a special population, it is also important to take into consideration that there may exist certain differences between and across this population. While the aforementioned study by the NCAA revealed that insomnia, mental exhaustion, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed were common mental health concerns for student-athletes, this same investigation revealed that this does not hold true for African American student-athletes. (NCAA, 2023).

Non-white athletes reported a different set of common factors impacting their mental well-being. While all student athletes identified academics as having a negative impact on their mental health, non-white students were more likely to identify financial concerns and worries about the future. Thirty-five percent of African American student athletes cited financial worries, compared to 19% of white student athletes. This extended to concerns about family, the amount of playing time, their relationship with the coach and team environments (NCAA, 2023). It is unclear as to what may account for differences in primary mental health concerns among African American student-athletes compared to their white counterparts. However, these differences may be due in part to external pressures and racialized performance expectations (Haywood & Payne, 2017; Cooper & Dougherty, 2015; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013).

Culturally Competent Sport Social Work

The phenomenological dynamics at the intersection of college athletics and African American racial identity are complex. Further, these dynamics are influenced by a host of factors including sport itself, the institution, along with social pressures and expectations. This perhaps underscores the need for culturally competent sport social work practice. In this instance, sport social workers must consider the ways in which African American student-athletes experience the larger athletic and social contexts. Such experiences may influence how well one transitions to college athletics, which in and of itself is generally a tall order; but when the phenomenological dynamics associated with racialized performance expectations are considered, the proposition may become even more difficult.

A credible threat? Within the athletic context as well as the broader social context, prior research suggests that African American athletes are often confronted with stereotype threat (English & Kruger, 2020). As it pertains to African American student-athletes competing in college athletics, stereotype threat may play a significant role in shaping their experiences and how they manage their expectations. To be sure, stereotypes about African Americans and athleticism have been prevalent in society for some time (see Hoberman, 1997; Sailes, 2017). These stereotypes often suggest that African Americans have a physical advantage in sports due to certain genetic factors. While these stereotypes may seem positive at first glance, they have negative consequences. Stereotypes such as these create the expectation that African American athletes *should* excel in sports, which in turn may lead to internalized pressure. Moreover, when African American student-athletes are aware of these stereotypes, they may feel a heightened sense of responsibility to perform well. As such, they may fear that their performance, whether

good or bad, could be interpreted as confirming these stereotypes. This in turn may lead to amplified stress and anxiety (Tran et al., 2023).

Full coverage. In addition to stereotype threat, media coverage and public perception may also contribute to racialized athletic performance expectations. That is, when African American athletes are portrayed in particular ways by the media, performance expectations are in turn influenced (Ash et al., 2023). Once again, non-human and mythical nicknames given to athletes embed stereotypical notions and hence expectations of (*black*) athleticism into the collective consciousness of the sports community (Hall, 2001; Hoberman, 1997). Thus, it is the media's exaggeration of athleticism and overemphasis on physical attributes and natural talents of African American athletes that may reinforce racialized performance expectations. In summary, media coverage and public perception can contribute to racialized performance expectations for African American athletes by perpetuating stereotypes, creating hyper-visibility, and influencing how athletes are perceived and treated by the public and the broader sports community.

To be sure, performance expectations can vary widely. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that not all African American student-athletes necessarily face higher performance expectations compared to their non-African American counterparts. Moreover, a host of factors are thought to influence the expectations that are placed on them. This includes race, culture, gender, socioeconomic status, and as stated earlier, institutional dynamics, the sport itself, and the coaching staff.

Nonetheless, culturally competent sport social work practice must seek to address stereotype threat, media influence, and other factors that may contribute to racialized performance expectations for African American student-athletes. This includes creating a supportive and inclusive environment that acknowledges these challenges and helps mitigate their effects. Promoting more inclusive and humanistic representations of athletes is essential for creating a fairer and more supportive sports culture.

Conclusion

The current discussion highlights circumstances and certain dynamics that shape attitude and performance expectations of African American student-athletes at PWIs. Research on the topic is limited, but some suggest that African American student-athletes competing in revenue producing sports like football and basketball at the NCAA Division 1 level may experience greater athletic performance expectations than do their non-African American counterparts.

These performance expectations do not begin with, nor are they limited to, the athletic context.

African American student-athletes may also experience greater pressures and expectations from family and friends to be successful in the athletic context compared to other student-athletes. This may be due to a host of factors, including cultural and societal expectations, as well as the fact that many African American student-athletes come from economically challenged

backgrounds and may see athletics as a means to provide economic stability for themselves and their families.

Once again, not all African American student-athletes experience racialized expectations. Nonetheless, it's important to be cognizant of this phenomenon and its potential impact on the mental health of these student-athletes. Sport social work practice can be instrumental in assisting African American student-athletes effectively cope with the external pressures and demands associated with college athletics at PWIs including racialized performance expectations.

Firstly, sport social workers should have a deep understanding of the cultural background and experiences of African American student-athletes. This includes knowledge of the historical, social, and economic factors that have shaped their experiences. Further, sport social workers can assist African American student-athletes cope with the aforementioned pressures and expectations by providing individual and group counseling to help them process their experiences and develop strategies to successfully navigate the college athletics landscape.

Finally, sport social workers can work to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for African American student-athletes. This includes working with coaches, teammates and other stakeholders to advocate for an environment in which all student-athletes feel comfortable discussing their concerns and struggles thereby creating a sense of belonging and community among African American student-athletes.

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