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# Amalgamation and the ideology of white supremacy in American sport

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Amalgamation and the ideology of white supremacy in American sport

Todd Crosset, Ph.D.

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July 20, 2015

Mr. Chairperson, Madam Secretary, Delegates,

I bring greetings from University of Massachusetts Amherst, which among other things, is home  
to the papers of African American scholar, civil rights activist, [W E B Du Bois](#).

SLIDE

You may recall that Du Bois famously warned if we didn't deal with racism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it  
would be the issue of the 21 century. Here we are.

A little over 100 years ago, in the summer of 1911, Du Bois, attended a multi-national  
conference convened to address global racism; the International Races Conference. He was  
buoyed by his experience at the conference. In a rare burst of optimism, he told his readers that  
someday the barriers to “intermingling” would fall. Leaders “will be composed of every shade of  
color, so will the masses of workers.” People of all races “will work shoulder to shoulder with  
black and feel no degradation.” His optimism was short lived.

## SLIDE

At the same moment Du Bois was in London, so was the heavyweight boxing Champion of the world; the Black American, Jack Johnson. He had come to defend his title against Billy Wells

In pre-fight banter, Johnson racialized his title defense, discounting any claims he was fighting for the United States: “Fight for America? Well, I should say not. What has America ever done for me or my race?”<sup>i</sup>

The fight came on the heels of the “Great Gama’s” wrestling exhibition in England. The Indian defeated all comers the summer before<sup>ii</sup>

## SLIDE

Two men of color, demonstrating physical superiority in combative sport, challenged the nationalist racial ideology supporting the British Empire -- It was too much for British Officials. Fearful a Johnson victory over Wells might spawn unrest among the colonized people of South Africa and India, they cancelled the fight and adopted a “color bar” for boxing. The interracial ban remained in place until 1948<sup>iii</sup>.

When Johnson returned to the US, his troubles continued. He faced a series of arrests and prosecutions the result of his growing prominence, his ability to articulate and demonstrate a

challenge to white supremacy and his relationships with/marriage to white women. He fled the country rather spend time in prison for loving, being loved and marrying Whites.

This brief story from the summer of 1911 illustrates how racism is a global system with particular local expressions. The English worried about colonial unrest; the US worried about White racial purity.

And that summer 1911 illustrates that it is sometimes the athlete and not the academic that reveals the core of racism.

SLIDE

It has been an eventful year. To speak before the UN regarding structural racism in the US sport at this moment is quite an opportunity<sup>iv</sup> Folks in the US seem open to re-considering the extent to which race matters.

SLIDE

I teach my students that Sport is particularly salient in understanding race for three reasons. First, sport is necessarily about body. And race – that specious categorization of people based on biological attributes for the purpose of establishing and nurturing power and privilege -- is also about body.

In any discussion of race and sport, it is critical that we recognize each of us comes to know the world through our bodies. Surely as sight and mind shape our knowledge, so does movement and touch.

Although it is social construction, not a biological one, race is nonetheless embodied. We carry racial identity deep in our bodies.

Structures and practices don't change simply by trying to change the way people think. A change in perception requires shifts in how the body is lived in the world<sup>v</sup>.

We can't just say no to racism.

How and with whom we live, dance, work and play has consequences for our understanding of race. With and through our moving bodies we disrupt or confirm taken for granted beliefs about race.

Second, sport is inherently conflictual. Racism is also conflictual. One group's gain is at the expense of another.

While some may say, sport is just a game (and we all understand that) it is fundamental to sport that we take the playing seriously. To do otherwise (to be dishonest or pusillanimous) is to be a spoilsport.

That we know we are playing or watching a game, does not make the conflict trivial.

Every episode, every game, every encounter in sport is an opportunity for peace making. Every game is also the threat of the opposite.

And finally, sport is a rather unique form of entertainment. It invites us into the game by the promise fans (if they cheer hard enough, sing loud enough, and/or perform the correct rituals) can have impact on the athletes and the outcome. Fans, although distant from the game, feel a part of it. Yet sport is spectacle nonetheless. So while actively engaged, fans also sit in judgement of athletes. The combination of judgmental and active engagement with a spectacle of

physical conflict provides a context ripe for the expression of racist ideas. Ideas, rarely espoused in public, find their way into sporting events.

#### SLIDE

It bears remembering, that racism is rarely the only factor impacting issues of access, differential treatment, and discrimination. The rash of racism expressed by European Soccer fans, for example, is wrapped up in the construction of masculinity via anti-social behavior. The Indian Premier cricket league's use of white women as cheerleaders illustrates the intersection of race and sexuality. The over representation of US whites in sports like lacrosse and skiing is a product of the overlapping systems of race, class and cultural capital.

At the risk of over simplification, my discussion today focuses on just two themes central in America's struggle with racism for the last 100 years:

#### SLIDE

I am starting with broad themes of amalgamation and white supremacy, because, as activist and sport scholar Harry Edwards points out,

“Sport inevitably recapitulates the character, structure and dynamics of human and institutional relationships within (and between) societies.” And it recapitulates the “ideological values and sentiments that motivate and rationalize those relationships.” (Edwards calls this ‘First Principle of the Sociology of Sport’)

It is critical, that Edwards uses the term “recapitulates” rather than “reflects”. Sport is not a mirror of society. Sport’s unique structures and practices re-expresses and gives new form to the character, structure and ideologies of a culture.

One central feature in America’s history is amalgamation – the coming together and the mixing of various races and ethnicities.” Jack Johnson illustrates the United States experience with intimacy across ethno-racial lines, however, is one of “amalgamation *interruptus*: an irregular, stutter-step, tension-filled, and sometimes violent” process<sup>vi</sup>. American amalgamation sometimes seems more a “boastful fiction” than a reality.<sup>vii</sup> Yet, within a time frame of 100 years, we can argue that religious, ethnic and race mixing is a central feature of the history of the United States<sup>viii</sup>.

Another persistent theme of America, is white supremacy. The insidious lie of white exceptionalism, white moral superiority, and white privilege. I am not referring to the loud and hateful white supremacy – although we still have that issue. What I am referring to here is the subtle sense of comfort that comes with being a White American, the sense of being normal, of being right, a sense of being part of the standard to which others races should aspire.

The recapitulation of America’s sometimes contradictory values of white superiority and amalgamation is illustrated in post WW II integration.

After the Second World War, athletes and sport pioneered an American version of integration. African American Athletes like Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Jessie Owens were American heroes, iconic figures that set us apart from Nazi Germany. For Black America, these athletes challenged notions of racial inferiority. For White America, these Athletes' were proof of America's promise of opportunity for all. They ushered in a tumultuous period of integration in American society.

But Post WW II integration, for all its benefits, did not address racial justice. There were no Truth and Reconciliation commissions, no reparations. It was merely an end to the color bar. The form and fashion of integration in American sport, decimated black sport organizations that had developed during the Jim Crow era. The Negro leagues in baseball died out, black golf and tennis organizations faded as blacks entered the once all white leagues.

Sport's integration provided a road map for America's broader approach to integration – White communities, businesses, schools, took in the best and the brightest from black communities. Opportunities were offered to those who could fit in and excel to similar impact. Enticing the most talented Blacks to participate in white society resulted in the bifurcation of the black community. It left the urban core without a professional class and a smaller middle class. The process, over time weakened black institutions that provided stability<sup>ix</sup>.

This method of integration also provided abdication for Whites. That some people of color could make it, demonstrated, that as a group, Whites were not responsible for current disparate racial outcomes in our society. White America was able to pat itself on the back for becoming a multi-racial society and blame people of color for inequality<sup>x</sup>.



Today we are dealing with the consequences of this method. We have become a society with few admitted racists yet with profoundly racialized outcomes.<sup>xi</sup> *(So while we no longer deny access to sport based on race and generally we are not a society in which fans throw bananas and hurl racial insults at athletes, we have not yet effectively address racism.)*

12:30

Within this framing, I want to share with you three contemporary issues, which, although particular to the US, may have global implications.

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1.) The racial re-segregation of Youth Sport, 2.) The repeated defense of demeaning symbols of indigenous people in sport, and 3. Racial inequities in our collegiate sport system.

One outcome of a society with few admitted racists yet with profoundly racialized outcomes is re-segregation. Once the centerpiece of civil rights, today, our primary and secondary schools are increasingly segregated. The vast majority of white students attend majority white schools (about ¾ of our white students attend schools that are 75% White). And in my region of the country (New England) over half of the black students attend Schools that are 90-100% non-white<sup>xii</sup>.

White America, steeped in our subtle superiority, reframe the current resurgence of racial segregation as “natural” and unproblematic. We convince ourselves that we move for better schools for our children, for a better neighborhood, a bigger house, or that we place out children

in private schools because we simply want what is best for them. Anything than admit that our choices might have something to do with race.

American's voluntary segregation is recapitulated in youth sports – demonstrated in these video's from where I live.

SLIDE (videos)

Almost without exception my students tell me their youth sport teams were less diverse than their classroom experience. The racial segregation within youth sport is an amplification of America's racial divide and recapitulates the sentiment that cross-race experiences are no longer a priority.

This phenomenon is propelled by a privatized youth sport system. What started as private training academies for elite athletes has spread across all levels and abilities. As local government budgets shrank so did low cost opportunities to play sport via park and recreation leagues. Private entrepreneurial youth sport organizations filled the gap.

Between club fees, travel and equipment, the business of youth sport now generates 10s of billions of dollars in revenue. Families, particularly suburban families, spend thousands of US dollars annually for children to participate in recreational sport.

There is evidence to suggest this new privatization of sport is facilitating participation along class lines<sup>xiii</sup>. The extent to which it is contributing to the racial segregation I am observing

is not yet understood. But clearly, private organizations do not share a “sport for all, for the good of the community” approach of public leagues.

#### SLIDE

I find this reiteration of “voluntary segregation” in sport problematic because it “naturalizes” and affirms racial difference, and because it undermines the anti-racist potential of sport.

Through sport we can come together in intimate, physical and passionate ways. Mixed race youth teams offer an avenue to racial understand, a counter narrative about race that few other activities match.

There is no guarantee mixed race teams will result in increased racial tolerance and understanding. So much depends on context and leadership. And clearly the cherry-picking type of integration, where white teams, or suburban schools invite in the token and superior black athletes, is problematic. But mixed race youth sport does offer anti-racist potential, far more potential than do hyper-segregated teams<sup>xiv</sup>.

#### SLIDE

The UN has weighed in on similar issues (The Sport, Development and Peace Initiative) declaring that sport can contribute to community development and peace under the right conditions. I wonder if the UN, through this committee, couldn’t make a similar statement about sport’s anti-racist potential. Further, the UN might support research, provide encouragement, guidelines and best practices for coaches and communities on how to employ the sport experience to challenge racism much as they have for Sport Development and Peace. And

finally, I wonder, if through this committee, UN might encourage national and international governing bodies of sport to develop generative strategies to support multi-racial youth teams, particularly those with leadership of color at all levels; team, club, league with the expressed intent to combat racism.

2. The persistent defense of retaining demeaning symbols of Native Americans as mascots and team names

SLIDE

The little hope I have for sport participation to challenge racism, is far outweighed by my pessimism regarding sport spectating. In particular, the recent explosion of fantasy sports provides Whites (90% of fantasy players in North America are White (*FSTA*))<sup>xv</sup>, with new forms and new rationalizations for our persistent and subtle white supremacy. Fantasy sport offers participants, among other things, the illusion they enjoy the power over athletes. This type of spectating feeds a post-colonial desire to affirm white managerial superiority. The fantasy of fantasy sport, among other things, is the “vicarious management” of objectified and commodified black bodies. Contemporary viewing practices are characterized by majority white audiences sitting in judgement of mediate black athletes, and at the same time denying to themselves their racism by claiming to admire black athletes.<sup>xvi</sup>

This denial of racism is recapitulated in American Sports fans fight over Native American names and mascots.

The United Nations has weighed in on this issue previously. In the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, regarding discrimination, it stated that it is "a right of Indigenous Peoples to determine our own identities and to not have false identities and personalities imposed on them."

#### SLIDE

The American debates must seem absurd from afar. Athletes regularly switch teams. They may be a Tiger one year and a Lion the next without detrimental effect. And Teams periodically change names. The Charlotte Bobcats were recently renamed the Hornets, the Washington Bullets shifted to the Wizard, and the Highlanders became the New York Yankees. Why not just change a name of sports teams such as the "Washington Redskins", the "Red Raiders" and the "Agawam Brownies" which demean and stereotype,. Why the fuss?

#### SLIDE

Part the reason is the value the US places on protecting speech and the majestic pace of our courts. But the primary reason for resistance is the logic and power of contemporary White

supremacy which rests on the notion that our systems and practices are OK. We want to believe racism is perpetrated by evil, ignorant people. Recalcitrant organizations, communities and owners, it seems to me, are motivated by their need to protect their sense of self. No one wants to admit that one of the things they hold dear (a sport team) could also be causing harm.

Over the last 30 years, slowly, community by community, schools, colleges, and professional teams are switching names and changing mascots. Sometimes, through great efforts of local indigenous people, communities have come to understand how these names and symbols demean and offend<sup>xvii</sup>. The community debate and the process of changing names, forces us to confront the realization that racism has little to do with intent.

I encourage this body to affirm eradicating demeaning and degrading symbols of indigenous people and other people of color in sports be they mascots or team names or fan taunts, cheers or artifacts, because people of color should be able to determine our own identities and to not have false identities and personalities imposed on them. But also, through community debates about these names, mascots and cheers, White folks can come to the hard realization that racism is systemic and persists without intention and overt hatred.

## SLIDE

3. A third issue to which I would like to draw your attention is our collegiate sport system. As you are probably aware, United States College sport fuels a global sport industry. Athletes from around the world train and compete in this system. Some go on to play professionally or for national teams.

In this system athletes compete as amateurs. In exchange for doing minimal academic work and representing a University, athletes get to compete against and train with some of the best young athletes in the world. They receive room and board, excellent coaching and access to world class facilities.

For many young athletes the US college system is the best option for competing at a high level. For many, college offers them their finest sport experience

Amateurism, upon which this system depends, is a vestige of the past. For the most part, highly exploitive, commercialized amateur sport has been successfully challenged. Athletes, who play for their country in the Olympics or the World cup, for example, now receive some sort of compensation beyond room and board.

There is growing concern regarding the exploitation of collegiate athletes. This is particularly the case for two sports, basketball and American football. The fan appeal of college football and basketball rivals any professional league. Last season, college basketball's championship game had larger audiences than did the NBA 6<sup>th</sup> and deciding championship game, more than last year's 7<sup>th</sup> game of the baseball world series. College basketball's final tournament alone generates \$700 million in television rights. These two sports account for billions of US dollars in revenue annually. And the athletes who play college basketball and football do not receive any payment for their labor. The rules even deny them the ability endorse products.

The system is slow to change. The current arrangement offers too many benefits to its stakeholders: universities, professional leagues, coaches, administrators, the media and sponsors.

What is less acknowledged about this system and I suspect contributes to the slow change is its “redistribution of resources along racial lines.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Other collegiate sports, like swimming or lacrosse do not generate revenue. They cost more than they bring in. The revenue generated basketball and football fund the non- revenue sports.

#### SLIDE

All athletes, no matter their popularity or the popularity of their sport, are treated the same. A scholarship in women’s swimming is the same as a Football scholarship. The superior facilities, the travel, and coaching for non-revenue sport is funded by the labor of the athletes in football and basketball

With the exception of basketball and football, college athletes are disproportionately White. 90% of college athletes playing lacrosse identify as white. It is similar in the sport of swimming and diving. And the further we get from elite sport (Division III) the Whiter college sport becomes, particularly (as Prof. Douglas will address) for women<sup>xix</sup>.

#### SLIDE

Over 60 % of all Division I male basketball players identify as African American. And when we reach the elite level, the racial divide become more extreme. Sixteen of the 20 final



four starting men's basketball players in 2015 were African American. Athletes of color are the majority in Football.

In the abstract, and through the lens of white supremacy, we can rationalize this system. All college athletes worked hard, are talented and should get the same reward. But on a practical level this is a system that recapitulates the redistribution of resources along race lines. It is predominately black athletes who labor to provide elite athletic opportunities for young people from predominately middle and upper class white families.

My colleague Billy Hawkins has dubbed college sport the "New Plantation."<sup>xx</sup> And like the old plantation, many Whites fail to see the injustice and argue that Basketball and Football players should be grateful for the opportunities provided them.

## SLIDE

I acknowledge that compared to the rest of the world, the US collegiate sport system is unusual. Nonetheless, I wonder if, in addition to encouraging equal access to sport, free of discrimination, the UN could also declare that athletes should be able to participate in sport free from excessive economic exploitation. Athletes should not be indentured servants of colleges, states or nations. If spectators pay to watch, media pays to broadcast, and sponsors pay to be affiliated with a sporting event, athletes should be reasonably compensated.

Further, recognizing that sport governing bodies have a responsibility to the development of sport across a broad spectrum and levels of sports. And these governing bodies often use the

commercialized sport spectacle to generate resources, I wonder if this committee might encourage the promotion and development of sport in a manner that also ensures racial fairness<sup>xxi</sup> and in a US context, discourage systems that disproportionately benefit white athletes.

## SLIDE

### Conclusion

The eradication of racism seems like a tall order. To borrow an expression from philosopher Cornell West, I am not optimist of your chances, but I remain ever hopeful. I do believe we can challenge racism in meaningful ways through sport. If managers of sport are intentional and consistent in their efforts, it is possible chip away at systemic racism and come closer to Du Bois vision of a world where peoples of all colors can work and play shoulder to shoulder without degradation.

I appreciate your attention to some of the issues we face in United States and I hope that, with your global perspective you might provide us with guidance in our ongoing struggles.

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<sup>i</sup> Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, 264

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<sup>ii</sup> Alter, Joseph S. "Subaltern bodies and nationalist physiques: Gama the great and the heroics of Indian wrestling." *Body & society* 6, no. 2 (2000): 45-72.

<sup>iii</sup> Theresa Runstedler, "White Anglo-Saxon Hopes and Black Americans' Atlantic Dreams: Jack Johnson and the British Boxing Colour Bar," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 4 (2010), 657-89.

<sup>iv</sup> Actually it has been more than a year if we start with the Travon Martin murder, which was followed by the Ferguson protests, the National Eric Garner protests, including the athletes support of the "I can't breathe" movement and most recently the removal of the confederate flag from the State Capital of South Carolina. IN sport NBA players quietly threatened to reserve their labor to remove an owner for racist comments and a GM stepped down for similar comments, but claiming not to be a racist and the "Washington Redskins" was declared a slur by branch of the federal government. Most recently, America had to deal with the surprise Harper Lee novel in which we find out that our white hero of racial justice was also quite racist.

<sup>v</sup> Sullivan, Shannon. 2006. *Revealing whiteness the unconscious habits of racial privilege*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Hollinger, David A. "Amalgamation and hypodescent: The question of ethnoracial mixture in the history of the United States." *The American Historical Review* 108.5 (2003): 1363-1390.

<sup>vii</sup> I have in mind here a speech given by Du Bois around 1952, retrieved from

<http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b203-i005/#page/8/mode/1up>

<sup>viii</sup> Hollinger

<sup>ix</sup> Harry Edwards, Social change and popular culture: seminal developments at the interface of race, sport and society. *Sport in Society* Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2010, 59–71

<sup>x</sup> For me, Urban stadia— tax payer funded, fun houses, built in the name of urban renewal, but primarily to the financial benefit of white owned teams, for the enjoyment of white men, often located in once vibrant, then blighted communities of color, -- are monuments to our only semi-successful post WWII integration.

<sup>xi</sup> Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without Racists*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>xii</sup> Orfield, Gary, and Erica Frankenberg. 2014. "Increasingly Segregated and Unequal Schools as Courts Reverse Policy". *Educational Administration Quarterly*. 50 (5): 718.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sport Participation Rates among Underserved American Youth. *Aspen Institute*. Prepared by Mike Sagas and George B. Cunningham of the University of Florida's Sport Policy & Research Collaborative January 15, 2014 retrieved from <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/sport-participation-rates-among-underserved-american-youth#sthash.Dvf5Qofl.dpuf>

<sup>xiv</sup> Through sport, young people can come to understand that peoples of other races come in all sorts of shapes, have various personalities and physical talents. For young white Americans, a key insight in undoing racism may be the physical realization that some African Americans are slow.

<sup>xv</sup> *The appeal of fantasy sports is clear; more than 41 million players in the U.S. and Canada participate in at least one fantasy league. But the demographic is fundamentally white and male—more than 80% of all fantasy players are men and more than 90% are white.*

<sup>xvi</sup> Johnson, Leola, and David Roediger. 2000. "'Hertz, Don't It?': Becoming Colorless and Staying Black in the Crossover of O. J. Simpson".

<sup>xvii</sup> Davis-Delano, Laurel, and Todd Crosset. 2008. "Using Social Movement Theory To Study Outcomes in Sport-Related Social Movements". *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. 43 (2): 115-134.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>xix</sup> The figures cited here are based on NCAA data from 2009-2010. Because the sports of indoor track and outdoor track use the same athletes we count them as one sport so as not to overstate Black participation rates

<sup>xx</sup> Hawkins, Billy Joe. 2010. *The new plantation Black athletes, college sports, and predominantly White NCAA institutions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=613687>.

<sup>xxi</sup> Crosset, T., Filo, K., & Berger, J. Ethics matter: Ethical orientations and disparate racial outcomes in elite collegiate athletic programs. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 4, 149-170, 2011.

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