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Black Athletes at the Millennium

C. Keith Harrison

For the Black man-child, however, two glimmers of hope penetrate even the grim depths of the underfooting. But in cold affirmation of the realities of his situation, these beacons illuminating would-be paths to the better life reflect the fact that, here, his human value is practically coextensive with his utility as a purely physical entity. For his only hope of escape has traditionally been believed to lie in either military enlistment or the dream of achieving a successful athletic career.

—Harry Edwards, *The Struggle That Must Be*, p. 5.

For more than two decades Professor Edwards has criticized sport at both the institutional and individual level. While some have conversely criticized Edwards for a myopic focus on black males (coupled with his analysis largely interpretive and exploratory but more importantly accurate), I seek to argue in this article that black masculinity needs a specific critique of its own nature. This does not mean that black femininity in sport should be excluded. However, Edwards' work on black males, sport and upward mobility towards professionalism—is on point in a major way. Listening to lectures by Edwards during the 1998–99 academic year at San Diego State and Saginaw Valley State respectively, I fully understood his fashionable message and dilemma: “An End of the Golden Age of Black Participation in Sport?”

Two of Edward's metaphoric phrases over the years are that “black athletes are the canaries in the mineshaft,” and that “sport recapitulates society.” The nexus of these two narratives will illuminate the vision of Edwards for many, many years. One, black male student-athletes and professional athletes have problems that exist in other forms and other ethnic groups

(majority and minority). Two, the end of the golden age of black athletic talent accessing mainstream institutions parallels conservative politics of anti-immigration laws, affirmative action backlash, and other forms of diversity trashing.

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to analyze and re-read Edwards and his theories, insights, and solutions at the brink of the millennium. I will base my analysis and response on his opening paper for this symposium on “Race, Sport and Professionalism.” I will also synthesize my observation of his lectures related to this paper at the previous mentioned universities, as well as a third lecture at the Association of Black Sociologists in San Francisco in August of 1998 (I was a discussant in response to his paper at the event). Relevant literature and data on race and sport will guide claims made throughout this paper.

Channeling

Referred to by Edwards as the *Triple Tragedy*, which is the single-minded pursuit of sports fame and fortune. *One*, the tragedy of thousands upon thousands of black youths in obsessive pursuit of sports goals that the overwhelming majority of them will never attain. *Two*, the tragedy of the personal and cultural underdevelopment that afflicts so many successful and unsuccessful black sports aspirants. *Three*, the tragedy of cultural and institutional underdevelopment throughout black society as a consequence of the drain in talent potential toward sports and away from other vital areas of occupational and career emphasis such as medicine, law, economics, politics, education, and technical fields.

These three factors connect to the systematic channeling of black males by American institutions. The consistent and historic perpetuation of race-linked black athletic superiority and intellectual deficiency; mass media propaganda that sports is “the promised land” and the most accessible route to black social and economic mobility; and the lack of black role models in occupations outside the sports participation arena not to mention leadership occupations within it. Edwards’ work over the past few decades affirms the conditions of black life in urban communities articulated by William Julius Wilson (1996) in *When Work Disappears*, and Robin Kelley’s (1997) superb *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. According to Kelley:

The struggles of urban youths for survival and pleasure inside capitalism, capitalism has become both their greatest friend and greatest foe. It has the capacity to create spaces for their entrepreneurial imaginations and their “symbolic work,” and allow them to turn something of a profit, and to permit them to hone their skills and imagine getting paid. At the same time, it is also responsible for a shrinking labor market, the militarization of urban space, and the circulation of the very representations of race that generate terror in all of us at the sight of young black men and yet compels most of America to want to wear their shoes (p. 77).

Considering the social ills of black men in terms of the penal system, incarceration and lately the rise of suicide with black males, there is little wonder that this particular masculine gender invests in making play work for them (i.e., upward mobility, opportunity). By “looking to get paid” as Kelley coins his chapter mentioned previously, black males are not pathological in terms of career choices, but rather adapting to their perception of reality (Harrison, 1997). Edwards has contended that one-way integration (sports/entertainment), the black middle class moving up and out of the ghetto, and the devaluing of the black mind and intellectualism in general—has led to a construct and racial identity of despair and hopelessness. The social circumstances of black males affirm the volatile nexus of education, race and sports. Systematically, the talents of black males in athletics continue to contribute to the high success of revenue producing sports programs (football and basketball). This sets up in American higher edu-

cation institutions what Edwards calls the sport “participation system” that easily reflects societal structures with a legacy of racism and discrimination.

Plantation System

Page Smith, in *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (1990), lends support for the system that Edwards has criticized for performing “child abuse” within the structure of sport in higher education:

One of the most conspicuous bizarreries of modern academe is the fact that the majority of the big sport athletes and virtually all of the stars are black. The crowning irony is that, in states where blacks were only a few years ago barred from voting, the majority of football and basketball players are black. On every campus I visit I see a little band of black students (they are especially conspicuous on campuses in states where there are few black residents, such as Utah, Nevada, Nebraska, Colorado. There are the mammoth black students—basketball forwards and centers, the football tackles, linebackers, and defensive ends—and the small black students—the fleet backs and pass receivers. They mix very little with white students. They are the classic black entertainers. It is for their exploits that arenas of white students shout themselves hoarse. The cultural discontinuity is staggering, the irony beyond articulation (pp. 15-16).

This duplicity of big-time athletics has taken on an existence of its own and its threat to the integrity of higher education has been chronicled in several publications: *Major Violation: The Unbalanced Priorities in Athletics and Academics* (Funk, 1991); *Sports For Sale: Television, Money, and the Fans* (Klatell & Marcus, 1998); *The Hundred Yard Lie: The Corruption of College Football and What We Can Do to Stop It* (Telander, 1990); and most recently *College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA’s Amateur Myth* (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998).

This systematic hypocrisy is vividly summarized under the heading “The College Sport Industry and Black Athletic Labor,” according to Sack & Staurowsky (1998):

At first glance, the dominant role of blacks in collegiate sport would seem to provide further evidence that sport is indeed an elevator to success. A closer look, however, reveals that uni-

versities have been far more concerned with exploiting the athletic talent of the black community than with nurturing its academic potential. Affirmative action programs on behalf of minority college students are currently under attack across the nation. Yet, affirmative action programs that give preferential treatment to athletes remain sacrosanct. The message this sends out is that America's colleges and universities are more concerned with producing winning sports teams than with seeking out and educating future black lawyers, doctors, and corporate executives (pp. 104-55).

As the NCAA repeatedly works to recreate, revamp and revise rules on eligibility standards for freshman eligibility, little if any legislation at all focuses on campus acclimation, diversity and sensitivity to subcultures and other marginalized groups entering traditionally white campuses. Coming to an environment that has preconceived notions, stereotypes, and stigmas about their (African American male student-athletes) academic and athletic abilities—the plantation system is indeed in full effect in terms of demographic imagery on collegiate campuses.

Few role models exist on campus in the area of professor, administrator, or head coach. Some would argue that even with these representative deficiencies (role models outside of sport), African Americans are afforded endless opportunities through sport. Dyson (1993) provides a map of this mythical construct through the vein of the ultimate benefactor (Michael Jordan) in the genre of race, sports and professionalism:

His big black body—graceful and powerful, elegant and dark—symbolizes the possibilities of other black bodies to remain safe long enough to survive within the limited but significant sphere of sport, since Jordan's achievements have furthered the cultural acceptance of at least the athletic body (p. 74).

In "The Assassination of the Black Male Image in Sport" I contend that the hypocrisy of collegiate athletics is the socialization of what I call "visiting athletic-scholars"(p. 47). Walter Byers (former NCAA executive director for nearly four decades) validates the capitalism value of sport in higher education in *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes* (1996).

Low graduation rates, few upper management opportunities, and relentless press on the troubles of some African American male student-athletes af-

firm the low expectations and limited categories of African American expression in society and access to diverse mainstream positions. Richard Lapchick of the Center for Study of Sport in Society/National Consortium of Academic and Sports was quoted in reference to his latest racial report card on hiring practices of collegiate and sport hierarchies: "I think the focus of the biggest gaps that occur, when it comes to minorities and women, are happening at the college level. You are dealing with institutional racism and an old boy system."

The same system that promotes that "opportunity" is endless for all, in particular African American male student-athletes—does not even graduate and/or hire diverse individuals within the organization of sport. Recent findings by Lapchick reveal that less than 5 percent of NCAA Division I college athletic directors are minorities and slightly more than 8 percent are women. In his book, *Sport in Society* (McGraw Hill, 1998), J. Coakley attributes these dismal numbers to racial ideology and belief systems about who should lead teams, run front offices and last but not least remain in control. Eleven National Football League teams hired new coaches during 1997; none hired a black coach even though experts agreed that four to six black candidates were qualified to be head coaches. "We have changes but little progress" (Edwards, 1999; Coakley, 1999).

A Historical Perspective

African American athletes in large numbers today have forgotten what my father says they never should forget—"that they're black." Meaning, the struggle for equality by African Americans is often hidden through the spoils of race, sport and professionalism. Tracing through racial sport history is very informative. In the August 1988 issue of *Ebony* magazine Edwards offers the following research analysis on sport history and blacks:

In the 1930s, Paul Robeson, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens led the fight for *Black legitimacy* as athletes. In the late 1940s and into the 1950s, Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, Larry Doby, Roy Campanella, and others struggled to secure *Black access* to the mainstream of American sports. From the late 1950s through the 1960s and into the 1970s, Jim Brown, Bill Russell, Curt Flood, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Muhammad Ali and Arthur Ashe fought to secure *dignity and respect* for Blacks in sports. These were not knights in shining armor, but

pony express riders carrying the burden of the Black struggle in sports over their particular stretches of historical terrain. And both the record books and the history books bear testament to the magnitude of the success of these great forerunners (p. 140).

By not recognizing and/or understanding the past, contemporary black athleticism falls short on progressive movements and causes connected to political and social issues. Bruce Kiid, dean of the Faculty of Physical Education at Health at the University of Toronto, says it best: "One can't understand race relations without understanding sport."

Historically, I agree with Edwards when he posits that the pertinent question is whether or not the next generation of blacks in sports will be able to move ahead and meet the challenges of their own historical era or will they have to first fight battles that African Americans both individually and collectively should have fought and won by now?

New Social Roles for Black Males?

Black masculinity is represented in popular culture and in particular in basketball and football. According to T. Boyd, co-author with A. Baker of *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity* (Indiana University Press, 1997), the sign of masculinity is equally problematic for those who work to repress it as a potential source of power as well as for those who look to exploit its political possibilities. African American males will continue to be channeled in three venues with little resistance from mainstream institutions: athlete, entertainer, and criminal. Community uprising is needed at both the institutional and individual levels to interrupt this dominant paradigm. The plantation system will continue until other ethnic groups integrate the status quo in professional positions outside of sport. In his book, *Yo Mama's Disfunktional!* (Beacon Press, 1997), R. Kelley offers his perspective on channeling:

Nike, Reebok, L.A. Gear, and other athletic shoe conglomerates have profited enormously from postindustrial decline. TV commercials and print ads romanticize the crumbling urban spaces in which African American youth must play, and in so doing they have created a vast market for overpriced sneakers. These televisual representations of "street ball" are quite remarkable; marked by chain-link fences, concrete playgrounds, bent and rusted netless hoops, graf-

fiti-scrawled walls, and empty buildings, they have created a world where young black males do nothing *but* play (p. 44).

Kelley has eloquently and critically captured what I call the "inner city" narrative, where sports ads are bombarded day and night by the mass media of urban communities, hopeless youth, and pick-up basketball games taking place 24 hours a day. The "Be Like Mike" slogan, image, and narrative is a fixture in virtually all societies, portraying and valuing a sports dream versus an educational and/or scholar-athlete progression.

American institutions are fully cognizant of this reality and these phenomena are promoted at various levels, macro and micro, academic and athletic, institutional and individual. In the final analysis, history is as much present as it is past and forgotten. Edwards declares in the final analysis from his appropriately titled memoir *The Struggle That Must Be*:

It would appear, then, that not only the past history and contemporary circumstances but also the future prospects of the Black athlete and the Black masses are inextricably intertwined and interdependent. And from this undeniable fact there is no escape for either—by way of sports or any other route. As things now stand, the overwhelming majority of young Blacks who seek to fill the shoes of O.J., Dr. J., Reggie J., and "Magic" J. in all likelihood will end up with no "J" at all—no job whatsoever that they are competent to do in a highly technological modern society. Thus, big-name athletes who tell Black kids to "practice and work hard and one day you can be just like me" are playing games with the future of Black society. And as I have repeatedly stated over the last dozen years, *Blacks have a principal responsibility to understand that sports must be pursued intelligently and that Afro-America's involvement with sports is no game* (p. 242).

With the positive success of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), black communities must continue to criticize the negative aspects of idolizing sport heroes—but in the vein of black female professional athletes. Analysis should focus on the negotiation of race and gender in sport, of which we have very little data (Coakley, 1998). Future studies should also focus on the plight of early black women scholar-athletes, other eth-

nic groups, and more of these findings should be linked and tied to current issues of education, race and sport. The struggle still exists and the last frontier for equality is the most feared—*black power*.

This struggle will not be easy as scholars have investigated the issue of education, race and sport for decades and few changes have evolved. In the chapter "Sports and the Politics of Inequality," of *Sex, Violence & Power in Sports: Rethinking Masculinity*, (The Crossing Press, 1994), the authors, M. Messner and D. Sabo, indicate that behind the legendary giants of professional sports are millions of athletes who compete in high schools, in recreation leagues, and on playgrounds. In the same book, *Sex, Violence & Power in Sports*, point nine of Messner and Sabo's "Changing Men Through Sports: An Eleven-Point Strategy" lends credence to advocating for ethnic groups participating in athletics:

Help people of color avoid exploitation in sports. While urban schools deteriorate and inner-city jobs become scarce, hundreds of thousands of African American and Latino youth continue to see sports as a ticket out of the ghetto. For the vast majority, though, sports are a round-trip ticket back to the ghetto. Insist that schools and community organizations link the athletic activities and dreams of minority-groups youth to solid educational agendas. Develop ways to use sport as a tool for raising the educational aspirations and achievements of minority-group youth (p. 218).

Messner and Sabo expound upon solutions I offered in my 1997 paper, "Philosophy of African American Males in Sport: Time for Change": 1) Develop historical knowledge of the struggle of early African American student-athletes and professional athletes; 2) education must be internalized as a value and priority as part of the package of the athletic experience at all levels; 3) end the notion of "natural" athleticism based on race and

publicize the amount of hard work that African Americans dedicate to sport; 4) leadership must be developed on the field with positions that are labeled as "thinking positions such as quarterback, center, pitcher, catcher, etc.;" 5) leadership off the field must be nurtured at both the head coaching and administrative levels to change the dynamics of subordinate and manager, yielding more opportunity after the physical activity of the sporting experience ends; 6) transferring the potential outcomes (dedication, hard work, commitment, persistence) to endeavors outside of sport professional; and 7) mass media and community development of images and representations of heroes and role models that are intellectual, realistic, and approachable.

Race, sport and professionalism are some of the most important issues in American society. It is my hope that in the millennium we develop new ways to market athletics where we have a triple threat versus a triple tragedy—education, sport and life after sport.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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