

**Race, nationality, and Major League Baseball: An examination of agenda-setting in two general-interest sport magazines**

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The sport of baseball has been linked with exclusionary practices and inequitable media coverage in terms of race and nationality since its beginnings in the United States in the 1840s (Seymour, 1960; Tygiel, 2002; Voigt, 1976). It is unknown whether such inequitable coverage still exists today, a time in which the number of international Major League Baseball (MLB) players has reached an all-time high of 31%, and the number of minority players is at 40.5% (Lapchick, 2007). Because of baseball's history of unequal coverage of these players, and the fact that international and minority players have become quite prominent in the league, it is necessary to examine which MLB athletes are featured in sport magazine feature stories in recent years to determine if the best players are being covered regardless of race or nationality.

The theoretical framework on which this study was based is agenda-setting theory, which states that the mass media play an integral role in telling people what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), as well as "how to think about it" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 62). Studying popular sport magazine coverage of MLB players over the past seven years allows the media's agenda for baseball fans to be revealed, and could reveal any racial or nationality-based biases that exist in the media with regard to MLB players. Exposing any biased coverage could lead to further research on what criteria are used to determine which athletes will be featured in stories, whose decision it is to run stories on some athletes but not others, and examinations of feature story reporting on MLB players in other mass mediums such as newspapers and television. Gaining a better understanding of and drawing attention to these possible inequities could lead to more representative coverage of foreign-born and minority MLB players who rank among the best in the league.

This study employed a content analysis methodology in order to determine which MLB athletes received feature story coverage in the nation's two largest general interest sport magazines, *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine*, over the eight-year time period of 2000 through 2007. Knoppers and Elling (2004) discovered that sport journalists most often decide which athletes or teams to cover based on which athletes or teams are performing best at the time. Therefore, it was hypothesized that an athlete's on-field performance should drive feature story coverage in the two magazines. The purpose of this study was to determine if the "best" athletes received feature story coverage regardless of the athlete's nationality or race.

A total of 304 magazines were coded for this study, which yielded a total of 204 articles about MLB players from April to September in 2000 through 2007. Exactly half (50%) of these articles were devoted to MLB players appearing on the best athletes list for the year in which they were featured. This was surprising, as it was thought that the athlete's on-field performance would drive the coverage. In looking at the results from a year-by-year perspective, the percentage of featured athletes on the best athletes list ranged from a low of 39.4% in 2002 to a high of 62.5% in 2005. Of these articles, white MLB players on the list of best athletes were underrepresented, and minority athletes were overrepresented. Chi-square analysis ( $\chi^2 = 3.923$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ) revealed that statistically significant differences existed between the expected and actual coverage of best athletes by race. In terms of a player's nationality, international athletes were overrepresented in the coverage of those appearing on the best athletes list, while U.S.-born athletes were underrepresented. Chi-square analysis did not reveal any significant differences, however.

The results of this study revealed that trends existed in the two magazines' coverage of the athletes appearing on the best athletes list during the time period of the study. White athletes were consistently underrepresented, while Latino athletes were consistently overrepresented. Black athletes were underrepresented during the first half of the study and overrepresented during the last half. Asian athletes were overrepresented in 2001 and 2002, underrepresented in 2003, and given as much coverage as expected in the remaining years of the study. A similar trend was found with regard to nationality, as U.S. athletes on the list of best athletes were consistently underrepresented each year except for 2007, and international athletes were overrepresented each year from 2000 to 2006.

In addition to the trends and patterns relating to race and nationality that were revealed in both magazines, each magazine was studied separately to determine whether or not differences existed in the two magazines' coverage. The results showed that *Sports Illustrated* provided almost exactly the amount of expected coverage to athletes on the list, while *ESPN The Magazine* provided statistically significant different coverage than expected, based on chi-square analysis ( $\chi^2 = 10.109$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The latter magazine provided white athletes not appearing on the list of best athletes with more coverage than expected, and also gave more coverage to minority athletes who did appear on the list more coverage. In terms of an athlete's nationality, the same was

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true for both magazines. *Sports Illustrated* provided more equitable coverage of athletes of differing nationalities than *ESPN The Magazine*, which afforded statistically significant different amounts of coverage to U.S.-born and international athletes ( $\chi^2 = 15.179$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Based on these results, it was determined that the two leading general-interest sport magazines in the United States use factors other than the athlete's on-field performance at least half of the time to determine which athlete to feature. It is thought that this coverage could possibly be based on personal factors such as the player's hometown, personal struggles, or other factors not directly related to the player's performance. Because U.S.-born athletes and white athletes appearing on the best players list were continually underrepresented in these magazines, and were overrepresented in terms of those not on the list, it is thought that these human interest factors might have been a factor for the selection of white athletes and U.S.-born athletes.

Because *Sports Illustrated* provided more equitable coverage of all racial and national groups than *ESPN The Magazine*, it is thought that *ESPN The Magazine* is setting an agenda in which certain groups should be viewed as more important than others by the readers. It is suggested that *ESPN The Magazine* make changes to provide more equitable coverage of minority and international athletes, as its rival *Sports Illustrated* does, in order to avoid reinforcing racial hierarchy structures in the U.S. and undermine the value of the minority and international athletes.

Suggestions for future research on this topic include studying journalists to determine the decision-making process used to select certain athletes (but not others) for feature story coverage. It is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the driving forces behind sport coverage in order to begin developing solutions to the problem of inequitable coverage.