The Experiences of the White Minority Athlete

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A culture’s societal norms and ideologies are often reflected in its sports. Race relations are inescapably woven into the dynamics of sport in ways that both promote positive social development and, paradoxically, reproduce dominant cultural stereotypes (Langenhove, 1994). In the United States of America, such ideologies are embedded in our popular culture and represented in films such as White Men Can’t Jump (1992). Constructed ideologies give rise to societal norms, and in doing so become self-fulfilling. For example, many positions in team sports are recruited on the belief that Blacks are faster, stronger, and more agile than Whites. Additionally, as race relations and integration have evolved, the former dominant positions of White Americans in many institutions have declined. Significant increases in minority populations in many areas of the USA have created an ironic reversal of cultural roles in many situations. The USA is on track for a non-White majority by 2042 (Penny, 2008). Minorities, defined by the US Census Agency, as everyone except non- Hispanic, single-race Whites, will make up 54% of the U.S. population in 2050, compared with 34% of the population today (Penny, 2008). In many settings, White Americans increasingly find themselves in the minority. Nowhere is this more evident than in the setting of certain sports.

This purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of the White minority collegiate athlete. White minority status within sport is a relatively new phenomenon and one that lacks in-depth study. Development of a successful team is a complex mix involving skill development, team cohesion, coaching technique and individual feelings of acceptance within the team. Making players of underrepresented races feel accepted is an important component to any successful team. Coaches and athletic administrators can greatly benefit from insights on the experiences of White minority athletes to better create an inclusive environment that would allow minority individuals to maximize their skill potential. In essence, a coach’s task is to embrace diversity. Coaches should use diversity as a means to not only advance important social goals, but to improve the performance of the team.

How does the social construct and evolution of race impact the experiences of minority athletes? Many studies have examined discrimination toward those in marginalized groups (England, 1994). However, little research has been done to explore the experiences of the White marginalized athlete. While it is no longer acceptable to use racial slurs in the public space, stereotypes and discrimination still exist and manifest themselves in more subtle ways. Research shows that racial profiling can trigger both physiological stress responses and self-monitoring of performance (Alter, et. al, 2009). This in turn, can lead to a state of self-fulfilling prophecy in which athletes, from different racial and ethnic groups, feel they must perform to preconceived stereotypical expectations. In sports, the biological determinants of race take on greater significance – athleticism in the form of speed, agility, leaping and jumping have become more closely associated with the Black athlete (Entine, 2000). Similarly, Coakley (2008) mentions how assignment to playing position is strongly related to the perception of the abilities of the athlete, which is many times directly correlated to race. This phenomenon known as racial stacking is the product of the social construction of race, racist thinking, and race logic (Coakley, 2008).

This research study was designed to examine the experiences of the White minority collegiate athlete. The qualitative methodology for this study includes primary sources of data from phenomenological one-on-one interviews. The final sample of participants to this study was comprised of eight former or collegiate athletes, from the sports: including basketball, football and track and field. The participants, six males and two females, ranged in age from 21 to 35 years.

For the purpose of this study, one broad, general question was asked to the participants during the interview: “When you think about your experience as a White athlete in your sport, what stands out for you?” Other open-ended, follow-up questions were asked; however, this main question was asked in hopes of “focusing attention on gathering data that will lead to a textural description and a structural description of the experiences” (Creswell, 2007). Each interview was transcribed and organized using the thematic structure. For each interview, once data reduction was complete, the researcher clustered the statements into themes, removing overlapping and repetitive statements.
(Moustakas, 1994).

From a coaching and team development/performance perspective, it is important to address the possible threats that can hurt team cohesion. Researchers have found that cohesiveness and efficacy positively relate to team performance (Carron et. al, 2002). If a player feels like an outsider within a group, this can lead to self-imposed isolation on the part of the player, which can negatively impact team performance. This study helped re-affirm some recognized racial ideology associated with sport and shed light on a unique consequence of the civil rights movement and resultant integration of sport. The emergence of the White minority athlete has created a paradox in that it represents both a triumph for the Black community in terms of opportunity but also serves to perpetuate many underlying racial stereotypes.