Who Are We Honoring? Extending the Ebony & Ivy Discussion to Include Sport Facilities

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Recently, Wilder (2013) authored Ebony & Ivy in which he discussed how the historical relationship between institutions of higher education and the slave trade subsequently perpetuated inequitable race relations in America. The slave trade allowed many of the first university presidents and professors to become wealthy individuals. Additionally, the attempted conversion of Native Americans into adopting Christianity and a European lifestyle were also aims of early universities. However, this was not limited to the prestigious institutions of the north. As time progressed, several universities – especially those in the American south – developed systems and traditions that honored their Confederate heritage or racist pasts with nicknames, uniforms, and rituals created by the institutions, and to an extent their athletic programs (Follett, 2015). Issues surrounding race in sport, and diversity in general, continue to be one of the most important issues facing managers of sport and leisure organizations (Cunningham & Fink, 2006).

In alignment with their racist histories, many institutions have named structures on their campuses after individuals that were either slave owners, segregationists, and/or openly racist. For example, Middle Tennessee State University has a building named after a Confederate general who became a prominent leader of the first Ku Klux Klan (Catte, 2015). Georgetown University has building named after a former president who sold 272 slaves to pay off university debts (Cauterucci, 2015). The University of Oregon has Dunn Hall, named after a man who served as the leader of Eugene’s branch of the Ku Klux Klan (Decklar, 2016). Duke and Yale have also had to recently deal with similar issues (Kendi, 2016; Phillip, 2014).

Since institutions of higher education are also involved in the business of sport, race issues have permeated into that space as well. Sport has historically been a space in which racial and ethnic prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation targeted toward People of Color has occurred (Edwards, 2010). Given this interrelatedness, sport combined with higher education has the potential to continue perpetuating racialized ideologies. This promotion of racialized ideologies offers a contrast, echoed by Smith and Hattery (2011), to the idea that the sports world is a space in which racial harmony exists.

Kendi (2016), an assistant professor of contemporary African American history at the University of Florida, discussed how the Stephen C. O’Connell Center at the University of Florida is named after a former university president who once voted against integrating the Law School and had sixty-six students of color arrested for staging a peaceful protest in which they were seeking space on campus to create a Black Student Union. Ironically, several University of Florida student-athletes of color routinely engage in athletic contests in a building named after O’Connell. Zeigler (2007) asked sport managers to consider “what are we really promoting, and do we know why we are doing it?” (p. 301). By naming athletic facilities after individuals with racist pasts, it can be argued that sport is promoting the racialized ideologies of those individuals.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine how many structures like the O’Connell Center exist at institutions competing at the Football Bowl Subdivision level in a Power 5 Conference. To this end, researchers will conduct an analysis of the names of athletic facilities found at those institutions. Our method involved compiling a list of athletic facilities at those programs and researching the backgrounds of individuals who have had structures named after them. The prevalence of facilities on college campuses named after slave owners, segregationists, and overt racists, suggests that an examination of athletic facilities is both necessary and relevant to the field of sport management.

Frisby (2005) stated that the goal of research is to promote social change by challenging the dominant ways of
thinking and acting that benefit those in power. We will analyze the naming of athletic facilities after individuals with racist pasts utilizing Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame as our theoretical lens. According to Feagin (2013), the White Racial Frame is a worldview comprised of a relatively stable set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to act (i.e., to discriminate). This frame of operation includes both conscious and unconscious understandings of race as a construct and has become commonplace as the rationalization tool of racial inequity in the U.S. Typically espoused by white Americans, yet also adopted by non-white Americans, this framing “includes negative stereotypes, images, and metaphors concerning African Americans and other Americans of color, as well as assertively positive views of whites and white institutions” (Feagin, 2013, p. 26). This positive view of white virtue, morality, and action has especially contributed to the glorification of white males, both throughout American history as well as in contemporary times. This is particularly the case in university settings where predominantly black labor has been utilized to construct facilities named after these elite white men (Feagin, 2016).

The conceptual framework of the White Racial Frame is appropriate for this study as most athletic administrators are White males (Lapchick et al., 2015). Cunningham (2014) commented that “men, Whites, and heterosexuals lack such a personal stake (in regards to diversity issues); consequently, it is equally understandable, from this position, for them to not research diversity and social justice issues or advocate for equality in the workplace” (p. 1). Thus, it is possible that campus facilities are named after individuals with racist pasts because those in charge have historically been and continue to be White males who may not be privy to or comprehend the social injustice associated with the situation.

Our aim with this study is to answer the challenge issued by Frisby (2005) for sport management scholars to critically analyze the bad and ugly sides of sport. Although many universities are striving to embrace diversity and leave their sordid racist pasts behind, Wilder notes that "It is difficult to celebrate diversity while standing in front of buildings that are named after slave traders" (as quoted in Lee, 2015, para. 2).