The Double Jeopardy of Black Female Athlete Activism: An Analysis of Social Media

Dain TePoel, University of Iowa
Lauren E. Brown, DeSales University

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In response to current events, there has been a noticeable increase in athlete activism pertaining to race and racism. Historically, athlete activists who adopt resistant politics critical of powerful institutions and structures (in and outside of sport) have received backlash from sports organizations, teammates, sports journalists, and fans (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Darnell, 2012; Kaufman, 2008). Factoring race into the equation complicates these outcomes with racially-inflected commentary and criticism (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). While the 1960s antiwar and civil rights activism of Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos, to name a few, has been well documented (Agyemang, 2012; Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016), recent scholarship, as detailed below, critically examines the activism of black male athletes in a contemporary context. Scholars have stressed the near-silence of activism among black male athletes in the post-civil rights era. Their research suggests that reticence to take on roles as advocates for social change may be tied to individual and organizational commercial interests in making the black athlete palatable to white American consumers (Agyemang & Singer, 2014; Cunningham, 2007). Black male collegiate athletes, however, highlight the importance of knowing the history of their activist predecessors (Agyemang et al., 2010) and it has been proposed that this role modeling could help inspire future generations of black male athlete activists (Agyemang, 2012). Additionally, Cunningham and Regan (2012) explored the interaction between race, activism, and sponsorship finding that non-controversial activism and a strong racial identity contributed to increased trust in the endorser.

Despite the recent scholarly attention paid to the legacy of black male athlete activism, there is a dearth of literature examining the activism of black female athletes. Black male athlete activism is often met with racial hostility, contempt, and derision which reafirms the racism athletes seek to redress in working for social justice (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Darnell, 2012; Kaufman, 2008). The experience of the black female athlete indicates responses to her activism would vary from her male counterparts. In addition to the racism faced by black male athletes, black female athletes face the “double jeopardy” of both race and gender (Gill, 2011). This “double jeopardy” has been explored in the collegiate context, with marginalization through sexist behaviors and silencing identified as prevalent themes (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005). The extant literature has acknowledged these gendered differences and called for culturally responsible programming that suitably addresses the unique experience of black female athletes (Carter & Hart, 2010; Carter-Francique, 2013). Building upon these differences and embracing the theoretical foundations set forth in Gill (2011) and Sanderson, Frederick, and Stocz (2016), this study will utilize critical race theory (Singer, 2005), sexism (as detailed in Fink, 2014), double jeopardy (Smith, 1992), and social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What themes are present in the responses to black female athlete activism?
RQ2: How is the double jeopardy of race and sexism present in these responses?
RQ3: How do responses to black female athlete activism differ from responses to black male athlete activism in terms of effects on group values and social identity?
RQ4: In what ways do reactions to black female athlete activism create or foreclose possibilities for further protest or collective action?

Social media has proven to be a medium through which athletes engage in activism and for scholars to examine the responses to said activism (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). These platforms provide female athletes who have been historically neglected by traditional media (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015) with a venue to voice their opinions in a manner similar to their male counterparts. This study will utilize the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts of players on WNBA rosters in 2016 to answer the research questions detailed above. Specifically, the focus will be on posts, tweets, and user-responses to those comments between July 5, 2016 (the shooting of Alton Sterling) and July 25, 2016 (48 hours after the WNBA rescinded fines levied against
teams and players that protested the shootings). While the study will center on black female athletes, posts and tweets from all WNBA athletes along with organizational statements will be collected to provide additional context for the study.

The collection and organization of this data for analysis is underway. Following the lead of Sanderson and colleagues (Sanderson et al., 2016; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015), the researchers will conduct a thematic analysis of comments, posts, and tweets using constant comparative methodology. Each researcher will independently undertake an initial reading of the data, following Bruan and Clarke’s (2006) data-driven method of searching for meanings and patterns that allow for the inductive emergence of themes. Each researcher will analyze the comments and tweets until clarification and refinement of themes fails to yield new contributions. The researchers will summarize and compare categories to identify similar themes and patterns prior to condensing and focusing meanings.

Results of this study will extend the literature addressing athlete activism by exploring the actions of and responses to black female athletes. In doing so, this study will offer insight as to the impact of “double jeopardy” within the context of athlete activism and how this complicated interaction influences group values and identity. Furthermore, suggestions for interventions, cultural competencies, proactive supports, and social justice will be offered. These suggestions will be intended to aid sport organizations in both supporting their athletes and managing the public relations associated with addressing controversial topics.