Concerned Students 2016: An Examination of the Views of Student-Athletes on Boycotts and Race Issues within Intercollegiate Athletics

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Purpose of the Study/Timeliness
In 2015, following the school's handling of several racial incidents occurring on campus, many University of Missouri football players boycotted all football-related activities until President Tim Wolfe resigned from his position. Despite potential financial damages, many powerful intercollegiate athletic stakeholders approved of the players' actions. This support legitimized the boycott and promoted unity among student-athletes. However, the power demonstrated raises questions regarding future challenges to the intercollegiate athletic structure. The purpose of this study is to explore the beliefs of student athletes on race, race relations, the usage of boycotts, and other related subjects. This research attempts to give a voice to a group that rarely is given the opportunity to provide its perspective.

Relevance to Sport Management
The MU student-athlete decision to boycott all football-related activities, including a November contest against Brigham Young University, over concerns of racial mistreatment by MU leaders brought significant attention to the power possessed by student-athletes (Gleeson, 2015). The boycott was a popular national news story and reached its apex when MU head coach Gary Pinkel indicated his support for the players through a message on his Twitter account, which included a controversial hashtag (Brennan, 2015). After several days of protests, Wolfe resigned as MU President, ending the boycott.

For the second time in three years, student-athletes from a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I football program were willing to forego engaging in football-related activities in order to improve the student or student-athlete experience. The first was Grambling State University, which saw student-athletes boycott a game against Jackson State University over the conditions of several athletic facilities and inefficient planning for away contests (Zirin, 2013). Both boycotts were led by student-athletes and were supported by external and internal parties including NCAA President Mark Emmert (Schroeder, 2015). Further, some media pundits identified the unity the players possessed during these boycotts as a watershed moment in intercollegiate athletics, showcasing a type of unrealized power that has never been on display (Fenno, 2015; Staples, 2015). They argued student-athletes could use boycotts to create significant changes within the NCAA. However, few have considered the student-athlete's perspective when it comes to using these strategies.

Literature Review
Friedman (1985) defined boycotts as an individual's attempt to achieve certain objectives by urging others to refrain from engaging in practices society deems illegitimate. They emerge when individuals abstain from the use of a particular product or service due to an egregious act perpetrated by the boycotted entity. The egregious act directly impacts the wellbeing of boycotters or causes harm to third parties. Individuals participate in boycotts to express their dissatisfaction with a company, its actions, or its policies (Shaw, Newholm, & Dickson, 2006).

Boycotts are viewed from either a consumer standpoint, which serves particular economic objectives, or a political perspective, concentrating on objectives of special interest groups outside the consumer movement (Friedman, 1991). Sen, Gürhan-Canli, and Morwitz (2001) further distinguished boycotts by denoting two different types: (a) economic boycotts and (b) social or ethical control boycotts. Social/ethical control boycotts attempt to force target companies toward specific ethical or socially responsible behaviors (Innes, 2006).

Within the sport industry, boycotts are relatively common (e.g., Dart, 2015; MacLean, 2014). They are driven by
issues dealing with perceived racial inequality or political problems discouraging certain groups from event engagement (Cunningham & Regan, 2011; Sugden, 2010). The most well-known sport boycotts are the U.S. Olympic team’s boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games and certain nation’s boycott of the 1984 Olympics (Sarantakes, 2009). Protests involving student-athletes occurred in the U.S. over the last several decades, including football players from Howard University in 1936 and the University of Washington in 1972.

Methodology
This proposed study will survey student-athletes at various Division I universities throughout the United States. The researchers hope to sample schools in different areas (i.e., Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, Far West) as well as ones affiliated at each Division I participation level for viewpoint differentiation. Using convenience sampling and distributing through the Qualtrics Survey Software, this proposed study hopes to obtain 500 surveys from student-athletes enrolled during the 2016-2017 school year. Participants will be asked questions regarding their demographic information (i.e., age, race, academic standing, etc.).

This proposed study will utilize a mixed methodology perspective. A qualitative analysis will determine if any consistent themes emerge regarding exploitation, racial segregation, or any similar deviations. This analysis will also identify any potential differences and similarities by region and personal characteristics. A quantitative analysis will determine if differences exist amongst student-athlete opinions of the Grambling/MU situations and the use of boycotts as a student-athlete mechanism. This analysis will involve both bivariate and multivariate procedures. For example, a Chi-square analysis will be used to test group differences between student-athletes in different areas of the country, Division I levels, and racial makeup.

Expected Results and Potential Implications
The researchers anticipate finding support for the student-athlete perceptions of exploitation as well as abuse. Both sport management researchers and media pundits argue student-athletes, especially minorities, are mistreated and change is needed within the intercollegiate ranks. Because the researchers are seeking the perspectives of impacted individuals, the researchers expect student-athletes will have similar views as those expressed by scholars and pundits. These implications are very important to the future of college athletics. If athletes view themselves racially abused or mistreated, the college experience must change. However, if student-athletes view themselves differently, then this study’s results could alter the college athletic narrative.

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge
Although rare within intercollegiate athletics, boycotts are successful in attaining the stated goals for student-athletes. Furthermore, some sport media pundits suggest student-athletes should engage in boycotts in order to receive additional benefits from revenue sources student-athletes help generate (Jaschik, 2016; Sharp, 2011; Wetzel, 2011; Yee, 2016). While these criticisms led to student-athlete representation with the decision making process (Hosick, 2014), many issues have yet to be solved and could be decided through a legitimized student-athlete boycott. Of particular interest are the viewpoints of African-American student-athletes, who are, according to several journalists, constantly abused (Higginbotham, 2011; Hruby, 2016; Schwarz, 2015). Past researchers examined trends in earlier years (Njororai, 2012; Wiggins, 2012), but limited works exist that examine the subject in today’s college sport environment.