

The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions

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THE NEW PLANTATION: BLACK ATHLETES, COLLEGE SPORTS, AND
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE NCAA INSTITUTIONS

Billy Hawkins

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Sports has been described as a microcosm of the larger society. It has also been depicted as a barometer for racial progress. However, sports is a powerful institution that provides a context for critical examination because it informs dominant cultural practices and informs ideologies that help to shape social interaction.¹

How ironic this is today, when we have many predominately White universities known nationally and internationally because of Black athletic excellence.²

Today, perhaps more than ever, experts and special interest groups are demanding reform in the administration and regulation of intercollegiate athletics. With recruiting violations and misconduct by players and coaches leading the headlines of sports pages and sports talk shows throughout the country, there is no wonder why these demands are being made. In *The New Plantation*, Professor Billy Hawkins presents “a critical analysis that examines the relationship between Division I intercollegiate athletes programs at [predominately white institutions] and Black male athletes. . . .”³ More specifically, the book “seeks to position Black male athletic experiences within the broader historical and social context of exploitation endured by internally colonized people in the system of slavery.”⁴ Hawkins also provides reform recommendations on how to decolonize Black athletes in

1. BILLY HAWKINS, *THE NEW PLANTATION: BLACK ATHLETES, COLLEGE SPORTS, AND PREDOMINANTLY WHITE NCAA INSTITUTIONS* 10 (2010).

2. *Id.* at 7.

3. *Id.* at 12. Mr. Hawkins does not use the term “student athlete” in his work because of “sociopolitical reasons and the structural dynamics” that are described in the book. Therefore, in order to maintain consistency, this author will also use the term “athlete” when referring to individuals who participate in intercollegiate athletics while attending a university or college.

4. *Id.* at 13.

predominantly white NCAA institutions.⁵ Hawkins allows readers to have a glimpse of his background by discussing his experiences as a Black athlete growing up in a small southern town, playing basketball at the collegiate level, and working with athletic student services in athletic administration while completing graduate school.⁶ This information not only gives readers a better understanding of the position that Hawkins is presenting his analysis from, but it also gives him (and consequently the book) more credibility to provide an analysis regarding this subject matter.

Hawkins' book provides a thorough historical overview of the educational experiences of Black students and Black athletes from Historically Black Colleges and Universities to predominately White colleges and universities. Hawkins begins this timeline with the Black colleges and universities that were created during the early to late 1800s due to the institutional arrangements of the Black Codes and the Jim Crow segregation laws.⁷ Aided by the financial support from Freedmen's Societies, Black and White religious groups, philanthropists and congressional charters, these Black Colleges and Universities "became the reservoirs of higher education for Blacks, especially since they were denied the opportunity to attend White institutions of higher education, especially in the South."⁸ Furthermore, Hawkins discusses the opportunities these Historically Black Colleges and Universities provided to Black high school athletes who wanted to play sports at the intercollegiate level to obtain a college education and the contributions that Black athletes and coaches from Historically Black Colleges and Universities have had at the professional level (e.g., Eddie Robinson, Doug Williams).⁹ Then, without much transition, Hawkins jumps to the statistic that eighty percent of Black students in higher education attended predominately white institutions from 1984 - 2007.¹⁰ It would have aided Hawkins' historical overview if he could have provided a brief synopsis of the major legal, political, and social events that led to this drastic change of Black students attending predominately white institutions instead of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. However, in passing, he does question the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* overcoming *Plessy v. Ferguson*, but a more extensive overview of the Civil Rights Movement may have led more credence to his analysis.¹¹ Hawkins

5. *Id.* at 174.

6. *Id.* at 6, 9.

7. *Id.* at 27.

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at 28, 29.

10. *Id.* at 30.

11. *Id.* at 59.

finishes his historical overview by describing the experiences of Black Athletes and Black Students at predominately white institutions.¹² One of the most interesting experiences he examined was the “invisibility v. hyper-visibility dilemma” of Black athletes on predominately white campuses. This dichotomy suggests that Black athletes “are so visibly noticed [because they are in such a small percentage on campus] that their true identity of being intellectually equal is invisible; they are simply minority, affirmative action, or admits.” Hawkins argues that this dilemma leads to some of the alienation and social or racial isolation that some Black athletes feel at predominately white institutions.¹³

One of the more complex aspects of Hawkins’ work is when he gives the background of the colonial plantation model and constructs a new plantation model in order to illustrate “the structural arrangements of predominately White institutions as it relates to Black athletes.”¹⁴ He then explains how a colonial situation is created and the two types of colonialism that exist: colonialism and internal colonialism.¹⁵ Hawkins explains that internal colonialism is used in the book to describe the relationship between Black athletes and predominately white institutions because internal colonialism exists where “a minority, indigenous or transplanted, is subjugated and exploited by the dominant majority colonizer.”¹⁶ A major component of the internal colonialism structure is the mutual dependence between the colonizer and the colonized and how that relationship leads to the colonizer becoming “illegitimately privileged” because of the way the colonizer exploits the work of the colonized.¹⁷ Hawkins relates this theory of mutual dependence to the current relationship between athletic departments and Black athletes because

intercollegiate athletic departments heavily depend on Black athletic talent to generate revenue for their multimillion dollar athletic budget. Consequently, the majority of elite Black football and basketball players depend on these athletic departments to purchase their athletic talent, for the opportunity to utilize and perfect their athletic skills, with hopes of obtaining a degree and/or career as a professional

12. *Id.* at 31–40.

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.* at 41.

15. *Id.* at 41–42.

16. *Id.* at 43.

17. *Id.* at 44.

athlete.¹⁸

Although Hawkins undoubtedly makes a strong argument that there is a “relationship of mutual interdependence” between Black athletes and predominately white institutions, comparing that relationship to the other relationships between colonizers and the colonized throughout history may leave some readers with the feeling that he greatly undermines the hardships and exploitation that the people who were colonized in Africa, Asia, and the original territories of the Americas went through at the time of their colonization.

After creating the structural mechanism to provide his analysis, Hawkins next discusses the racist ideologies concerning the Black athlete.¹⁹ He gives one example of how this racist ideology is created by explaining how when a Black athlete begins his collegiate career, the main focus is on his “athletic prowess,” not his academic endeavors.²⁰ However, when a Black athlete’s academic progress is focused upon, it is usually about the lack of progress the athlete is making, or if it is about his academic achievements, it is treated as “a freak of nature.”²¹ Hawkins explains, “[t]his presentation is a limited view of Black athletes, which positions them as intellectually disadvantaged beings and the institutions of higher learning as the advantage or superior partner in this relationship.”²² Although he ultimately blames society for creating this sort of racial ideology, he also puts blame on the mass media for covering the careers of Black athletes in this manner.²³

Perhaps the most interesting portion of *The New Plantation* is where Hawkins provides an in-depth analysis of the capital that predominately white institutions’ athletic departments accumulate due to the athletic performances of Black athletes.²⁴ It is here where he gives an “economic analogy of the plantation system and intercollegiate athletics.”²⁵ After providing an overview of the economics behind the American slavery system from the 1790s to 1860, Hawkins transitions into an exploration of the new plantation model in intercollegiate athletics.²⁶ He begins his examination by making the strong

18. *Id.* at 45.

19. *Id.* at 57–80.

20. *Id.* at 59.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.* 58–59.

24. *Id.* at 81–103.

25. *Id.* at 85.

26. *Id.* at 81–88.

assertion that “[w]ithin the current new plantation model of intercollegiate athletics, the NCAA and its member institutions not only profit off of the labor of athletes, in general, and Black athletes, specifically, they also profit off of their images.”²⁷ Hawkins uses multiple tables and an array of statistics in an attempt to support his assertion.²⁸ One area of statistics he focuses on to provide an example of how the “new plantation” exploitation functions is the sales of media rights that generate revenue for predominately white institutions.²⁹ For instance, Hawkins points out that, over the next fifteen years, ESPN will pay the SEC \$2.25 billion for the conference’s TV rights that was not taken by CBS’s fifteen-year, fifty-five million dollar per year contract.³⁰ As if to preempt the readers who will argue that this exploitation applies to all athletes and not just Black athletes, Hawkins then provides this statistic: Black athletes comprised 46.9% of NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision teams and 58.9% of Division I basketball teams.³¹ One of Hawkins’ best examples to support his position is when he does an analysis of the racial demographics of players playing for teams participating in the 2008 Bowl Championship Series, a composition of games that paid out \$170 million to the ten teams or their respective conferences.³² He found that 51% of the athletes participating in the BCS were Black, 38% were White, 3% were Hispanic, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% were classified as other.³³

Although Hawkins gives a strong critique of how the Black athlete is situated within in predominately white institutions and the NCAA, he does not overlook the benefits that Black athletes can receive from participating in intercollegiate athletics if they are able to “navigate the system effectively.”³⁴ These benefits include (1) having the opportunity to receive a college education and degree that will lead to future employment, (2) networking for future job opportunities with individuals that Black athletes meet through their participation in sports, (3) social mobility through similar networking, and (4) social mobility through being drafted by a professional sports team.³⁵

Similarly, although Hawkins provides reform ideas that would lead to a “decolonization” of the New Plantation Economic Model between Black

27. *Id.* at 88.

28. *Id.* at 89–94.

29. *Id.* at 91.

30. *Id.* at 92–93.

31. *Id.* at 94.

32. *Id.* at 98.

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* at 8.

35. *Id.* at 8, 116–17.

athletes and predominately white institutions, he notes throughout the book that there is a shared responsibility regarding this “decolonization.” For example, he states that, although athletic departments have the resources available to better aid Black athletes academically, it is also the responsibility of the Black athletes to do what it takes to obtain a quality education.³⁶ One of Hawkins’ ideas for reform focuses on getting Black athletes to get more out of their educational experience than they currently do. He posits that this can be done by having coaches’ bonuses and salaries correspond more to graduation and academic success rates than winning percentages.³⁷ Hawkins also argues that building stronger academic support systems, making freshman ineligible so they can focus solely on academics, and reducing course loads from twelve hours per semester to six to nine hours per semester would provide a better opportunity for athletes to learn more and perform better academically, while also participating in the time demanding entity that is intercollegiate athletics.³⁸ Although Hawkins does not outright call for athletes to be paid a salary like professional athletes, he does argue that athletes should have their athletic scholarships increased or be provided with a monthly stipend to off-set basic living expenses.³⁹ In the end, all of Hawkins’ reforms seem to center around the premise that predominately white institutes need to acknowledge and accept Black athletes “as partners in this intercollegiate athletic enterprise.”⁴⁰ In this way, Black athletes would receive a similar reciprocal benefit that the predominately white institutions are getting from the Black athletes’ athletic success.

However, what Hawkins’ analysis fails to consider are the possible legal and regulatory ramifications of his reform strategies. The institutions could not unilaterally implement many of Hawkins’ proposed reforms because they would not have the power to do so under current NCAA bylaws. The NCAA is a private association, and the intercollegiate institutions make up its members. Therefore, under the NCAA bylaws, the member schools would have to go through an extensive legislative voting process regarding these proposed reforms before they could take effect. What is more, some of the reform ideas are so radical in nature that it would necessitate a dramatic ideological shift in the NCAA’s fundamental principles. Although the proposed reforms would undoubtedly lead to significant positive change in intercollegiate athletics, it would take a concerted effort among all NCAA

36. *Id.* at 13.

37. *Id.* at 71.

38. *Id.* at 130, 178.

39. *Id.* at 179–80.

40. *Id.* at 180.

member institutions to create any reforms that would effectuate that change.

In the end, Professor Billy Hawkins creates a provocative argument that, in intercollegiate athletics, “the New Plantation Economic Model situates Black male athletes as necessary entities in generating revenue for athletic departments at many predominately white institutions.”⁴¹ He is at his best when supporting this argument with personal stories and analyzing the plethora of statistics and data that are included within *The New Plantation*. All readers will also enjoy that, instead of creating a work that merely complains about a problem without providing any solutions, Hawkins also details plausible reform principles and ideas that may aid in alleviating the problems facing Black athletes at predominately white institutions. However, as stated earlier, comparing the current relationship between Black athletes and predominately white institutions to the relationship of other colonizers and the colonized people may be extreme, but Hawkins uses this comparison to create a linear model for his argument. The use of this linear model also creates an organizational structure within the book, which makes it readable for both casual readers who are interested in only reading certain sections of the book and readers who are planning to read the entire book. Although all readers are likely to find some aspect of this book that is helpful, useful, or informative, it is probably most suited to be read by individuals who are interested in learning about the circumstances of the Black athlete at predominately white institutions and the steps that can be taken to change those circumstances in a positive manner. Overall, *The New Plantation* is a thought-provoking work that will cause readers to closer examine the role of Black athletes in intercollegiate athletics and how that role has evolved into what it is today.

Jonathan Bateman

41. *Id.* at 103.