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# RACE MATTERS IN THE NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION\*

EARL SMITH, PH.D.\*\*

Few people today recall the full measure of the predicament in which African Americans found themselves prior to World War II. In 1940, most black men and women lived out of common view in rural communities, chiefly in the South. Approximately 90 percent lived in poverty (measured by today's criteria). Their annual earnings were less than half those of white. The education they received was markedly inferior in quality. African American children in the South went to predominantly black schools, in which (on average) pupil-teacher ratios were one quarter greater than those in white schools, school terms were 10 percent shorter, and black teachers were paid half the salary of white teacher. The medium amount of education received by blacks aged 25-29 was about seven years. Only 12 percent of blacks aged 25-29 had completed high schools, less than 2 percent could claim a college degree. Very few blacks managed to enter the higher-paying occupations. Only 1.8 percent of all male professionals were black, and only 1.3 percent of all male managers and proprietors. Blacks made up 2.8 percent of physicians, 0.5 percent of attorneys, and 0.5 percent of engineers. No more than thirty-three elected officials in the entire United States were black. Of these, one was a member of Congress, but there were no mayors, governors, or senators. Only a single African American sat on the federal bench.

—William Bowen and Derek Bok  
THE SHAPE OF THE RIVER (1998)

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\* As the title suggests, thanks to CORNELL WEST, RACE MATTERS. (1993).

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Whatever happens to you out on that field, you know the white players are thinking two things about you: that you're some kind of superhuman because you're black, and that you're dumb.

—Warren McVea  
University of Houston  
in Olsen, 1968, *The Black Athlete*, p.159.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The deep, structural meaning of what is being alluded to in the two epigrams that open my paper speaks volumes about the plight of African American athletes. The noise that should accompany this plight is now silent. Yet, sociologists and others have been telling the story for close to one hundred years now. At the turn of the century, the eminent social philosopher William Edward Burghardt Du Bois could write that, “[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, it is sometimes hard to convince Americans of this fact. The dilemma faced by African Americans are sometimes juxtaposed to those of other race/ethnic groups and in the final analysis they fail to fully evaluate all of the ramifications necessary in understanding group comparisons. Early sociologists led the way in this futile exercise; it is now taken up by many.<sup>2</sup> As historian Barbara Fields makes clear in her fascinating essay “*Slavery, Race and Ideology in the US*,” there are no other groups in American society that have had to endure the indignities and abuses that have been heaped upon African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Socio-historically, this abuse was longstanding. It is, we are reminded, well into the 20th century before African Americans began to receive the amenities that accrue to all American citizens, except them. The list is long: we could start with voting rights. We could end this list with the right to decent, affordable housing. Full citizenship rights have

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1. W.E.B. DU BOIS, *SOULS OF BLACK FOLK: ESSAYS AND SKETCHES* (1903). *See also*, HERBERT APTHEKER, *THE CORRESPONDENCE OF W.E.B. DU BOIS* ( Selections, 1877-1934) (1973) (a letter written on May 30, 1903, post marked Chicago, Illinois, by the Black militant feminist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a leader in the early fight against lynching). A manuscript version of the letters are in the possession of the author, provided by Dr. Aptheker. Ms. Wells-Barnette was informing Dr. Du Bois that he had disappointed some for not appearing at a reading of *SOULS*, and that those in attendance were not happy with his essay and position on Mr. Booker T. Washington. Among them was Ms. Jane Adams, of Hull House (Chicago) fame.

2. *See* Barbara Fields, *Slavery, Race & Ideology in the U.S.*, 181 *NEW LEFT REVIEW* 95 (1990).

3. *Id.*

been hard to come by for African Americans<sup>4</sup> and sometimes in the new, postmodern debates about rights, we forget this. In her Presidential Address before the Organization of American Historians, President Linda Kerber reminds us that, “[a]t its founding moments, the United States simultaneously dedicated itself to freedom and strengthened its system or racialized slavery. It included the three-fifths ‘compromise’ and the fugitive slave clause in the Constitution.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Kerber, then, from their very origins on American soil, African Americans have not been the recipients of citizenship rights. The fact that these rights come later and grudgingly so needs to be always a reminder to us of how vacuous simple mutterings of “freedom” can be.

## II. THE ‘EARLY’ AFRICAN AMERICAN ATHLETE

It should not be a stretch then, to try to come to grips with the lack of rights extending to early African American athletes. This is especially true of those athletes performing in pre-1960s American colleges and universities. It applies to Paul Robeson of Rutgers, to Jesse Owens of Ohio State and to many, many others who dared to request a spot on the team. Racial hatred and racial abuse was commonplace, and the athletes understood that to compete they had to remain silent.

When Jim Brown was running over linebackers for Ben Schwartzwalder at Syracuse in the mid-1950s, he could not and did not win the awards that went to the “best” football players in the land. This by the way included the coveted Heisman Trophy. Who, in 1955 or 1956 was a better running and/or blocking back than Jim Brown? Nobody.

When Wilt “the Stilt” Chamberlain was playing for the University of Kansas (“Jayhawks”) and sportswriters were calling him moody and aloof, they all missed the point. All he was trying to do was cope within a bad situation wherein on any given day—on and off the court, on campus or in Lawrence—he was being called Nigger.

Examples such as these abound in sport sociology literature<sup>6</sup> and have become commonplace. We have now entered an age where schol-

4. *See id.* at 106. In commenting on citizen rights today Professor Fields notes that “the incorporation of Africans and their descendants into a polity and society in which they lacked rights that others not only took for granted, but claimed as a matter of self-evident natural law” remains an issue in American society.

5. *The Meaning of Citizenship*, 84 J. AM. HIST. 833, 841 (1997).

6. The best analysis done to date on African American athletes having to perform in racially hostile environments is Phoebe Weaver Williams, *Performing in A Racially Hostile Environment*, 6 MARQ. SPORTS L.J. 287(1996).

## HEISMAN TROPHY WINNERS

1990	Ty Detmer, QB*	Brigham Young	White
1991	Desmond Howard, WR	Michigan	Black
1992	Gino Torretta, QB	Miami	White
1993	Charlie Ward, QB	Florida	Black
1994	Rashaan Salaam, RB*	Colorado	Black
1995	Eddie George, RB	Ohio	Black
1996	Danny Wuerffel, QB	Florida	White
1997	Charles Woodson, DB	Michigan	Black
1998	Ricky Williams, RB	Texas	Black

Heisman Trophy winners (\* denotes award won as a junior)

ars are not afraid to draw upon these examples and analyze them from a variety of perspectives, including the legal. If you look at the conference agendas for many of the academic associations (e.g., history of sport; sociology of sport) you will find a session, or two, that address the *burning* issues of race and sport. Mainstream American sociologists, who heretofore have ignored sport, have now begun to pay at least some attention to the subject.<sup>7</sup>

Using the example that most social sciences use when discussing race/ethnicity in American society historically, African American people and especially the African American athlete have been discriminated against and this has hurt his performance.<sup>8</sup> From the time of the founding of the nation state we now know as America, African Americans have had a precarious relationship with the ruling norms of American society. Basi-

7. Please do not take this to mean all is well. In a recent review of the data I have learned that the topics of sport and/or sport sociologists have not been treated well by the mainstream sociology journals. Of the three decades, 1970s, 1980s and the 1990s (up through 1997) only thirteen (13) articles have been published in the top three journals. These are: *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY* and *SOCIAL FORCES*. See also E. J. Gorn & M. Oriard, *Taking Sports Seriously*, *CHRON. HIGH. EDUC.*, March 24, 1995, at A52.

8. We are reminded that the experts that say race does not matter are often unaware and/or ignorant, of the sociology of race and ethnicity issues. See generally, Robert Reich, *The Real Policy Makers*, *N.Y. TIMES*, Sept. 29, 1998, at A25. Reich says that oftentimes experts who have significant power and decision making authority "have no particular knowledge of politics or sociology." *Id.* Here, I am reminded that if African Americans were allowed to play in contests such as tennis, golf, ice hockey, etc., they would have acculturated to these games at an earlier point in time. Therefore, they would have had the seasoning time to learn to play the games they have been barred from playing at an earlier point in time. See Earl Smith, *The Self Fulfilling Prophecy: Genetically Superior African American Athletes*, 21 *HUMBOLDT J. OF SOCIAL RELATIONS* 139 (1995). [A special thanks to my friend and mentor whom I refer to as the *Doyen of American Sociologists*, Professor Robert K. Merton long of Columbia University for the title attached to this paper].

SPORTS ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN 'MAINSTREAM' SOCIOLOGY  
JOURNALS, 1972-1997

Journal	Total Articles	Sport Articles	%
1970s			
AM. SOC. REV.	408	3	
AM. J. SOC.	382	1	
SOCIAL FORCES	525	1	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1315</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0.38%</b>
1980s			
AM. SOC. REV.	610	0	
AM. J. SOC.	381	1	
SOCIAL FORCES	528	4	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1519</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0.33%</b>
1990s			
AM. SOC. REV.	449	0	
AM. J. SOC.	293	2	
SOCIAL FORCES	424	1	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1166</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0.26%</b>
<b>GRAND TOTALS</b>	<b>4000</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0.33%</b>

cally, these norms have not applied to African Americans and/or better still they have been applied in a fashion that did not apply to them.<sup>9</sup>

From its inception, what I call the "American Perspective," has been preoccupied with the denigration of African Americans.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally or as is more common today—globally—African Americans have had to fight against the odds to just exist.<sup>11</sup> To this extent, the various structural relationships, trends, and cycles of the American perspective have been identified to explain the processes of transformations among African Americans—and I add, without much success.<sup>12</sup>

9. See FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *TRUST: THE SOCIAL VIRTUES AND THE CREATION OF PROSPERITY* 269 (1995).

10. See ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (1990) (noticing this aspect of American social relationships in an early visit to the post-slave south). See also David Lionel Smith, *What is Black Culture, in THE HOUSE THAT RACE BUILT* 178 (Wahneema Lubiano ed. 1997).

11. See W.E.B. DU BOIS, *THE PHILADELPHIA NEGRO* (1899). Du Bois lays out the social, economic, and political conditions Blacks were living in at that point in time in this Northeastern city. See *id.* Another slightly different perspective is given in almost all of the work of University of Chicago trained sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. *But see* FRANKLIN E. FRAZIER, *THE NEGRO FAMILY IN CHICAGO* (1932).

12. For the latest attempt, see STEPHAN & ABIGAIL THERNSTROM, *AMERICA IN BLACK AND WHITE: ONE NATION, INDIVISIBLE, RACE IN MODERN AMERICA* (1998).

The varied attempts to pinpoint and analyze these relations, trends, and cycles have been within the context of so-called connections between Americans of the ruling elites (classes, status groups, industries) and the dispossessed who, for sure, have no deep concern over what sociologists like to call the human condition.

From an ecological point of view (ontologically and epistemologically), such a manner of understanding the needs of oppressed groups have been shown to be quite anthropocentric within our nation. This comes to us as we follow the flow of information and how it is disseminated via the variety of outlets accessible to the ruling media. At a time of increasing national and global concern over fellow citizens, and an awareness of the finite nature of natural resources, and the availability of basketball teams to play in foreign countries (follow the circuitous route of the ill-fated college player<sup>13</sup> from Coney Island, New York traveling to Italy to play the game, for greater exposure and playing time, to be able to make a bid for a return to Coney Island to play), speaks volumes as this relates to the susceptibility of the downtrodden human species to be able to fend for themselves and, hence, become across the long haul self-reliant that is, independent. The question then, becomes, can they?

Climatological changes, as well as scientific and technological advances, are almost never addressed in this discussion; yet they play a key or central role to progress among any consideration of African Americans in sport. Consider, that besides social relations and social structures, which are the forming basis of human reproduction, we would include the relationships with humans all over the globe. Who, for example, would have thought that when desegregation was partly institutionalized after *Brown v. Board of Education* was implemented,<sup>14</sup> that the very political/legal strategies that were used to break down barriers for African Americans would now come back to haunt those athletes involved in what was once a former leisure time pursuit?<sup>15</sup> To that ex-

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13. See Craig Lambert, *The Professionalization of Ivy League Sports*, 100 HARV. MAGAZINE 36 (1997). This is one of the best treatments of the problems extant in college sports.

14. 347 U. S. 483 (1954). See also, EARL SMITH, *A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE UNIVERSITY FACULTY* (1992). According to the eminent Duke University historian, Professor John Hope Franklin, in his 1976 Jefferson Lectures, Brown turned the issue of forced social segregation on its head. For the first time it allowed African Americans to be able to compete equally in a marketplace that has heretofore obstructed their entry way to open and fair competition. JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN, *RACIAL EQUALITY IN AMERICA* (1976).

15. See A. BARTLETTE GIAMATTI, *TAKE TIME FOR PARADISE: AMERICANS AND THEIR GAMES*. (1989).

tent, the human world ecology (e.g., the modern World-System) is in need of a much deeper structural analysis to be able to explain the social phenomena responsible for such disruptions of access to the opportunity structure.

That is to suggest that the deciphering of the processes of global change (the movement of workers from one place to another) also applies to basketball players. Only through the social dimensions of the relations underlining these processes are we going to find the answers to the central problem I am making reference to in this article, which is so confounding that it goes un-noticed in the larger media. So that I am clear on this point, I shall simply call this phenomena—Worker Displacement.

If we look only at the social relations of the production and reproduction of the basketball players in the US political economy, this severely limits the range of explanations we can offer for what now looks to be a global transformation of basketball labor. Such a narrow analysis would also restrict the dimensions whereby the basis for these changes can be explored and hence, explained.<sup>16</sup>

This paper, then, is an attempt to introduce this larger dimension of our growing relations with others in what political economists, sociologists, and historians have come to call or label World Systems analysis or studies. The overall equation of world-system analyses for our understanding of global change within the community of US basketball ultimately is the nature of the exploitation of labor.<sup>17</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to also introduce this mode of thinking and hope that other “race & sport” scholars will soon follow. It is no longer feasible to see the African American athlete as an isolated ghetto born human, struggling to rise up from the ghetto and through the avenue of sports to make a lot of money. This tragic figure does not exist.<sup>18</sup> The portrait is devoid of the interconnections of the modern World-Sys-

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16. Social scientific explanations rest solely on the ability of the researcher to empirically verify—that is falsify—his/her observations. Many of today’s social/behavioral scientists do not even bother. See Steven Weinberg, *The Revolution that Didn’t Happen*, N.Y. REV. (Oct. 8, 1998). See also JENNIFER HOCHSCHILD, *FACING UP TO THE AMERICAN DREAM: RACE, CLASS, AND THE SOUL OF THE NATION* (1995).

17. Is this “exploitation” self-induced? See KENNETH L. SHROPSHIRE, *IN BLACK AND WHITE: RACE AND SPORTS IN AMERICA* (1996). See also Kenneth L. Shropshire, *Sports Agents, Role Models, and Race-Consciousness*, 6 MARQ. SPORTS L.J. 267 (1996).

18. See Dr. Harry Edwards, *The End of Golden Age Black Sports Participation*, 38 S. TEX. L. REV. 1007 (1997).

tem, an egocentric world system in a rapidly declining humanistic world.<sup>19</sup>

How all this impacts African Americans striving for betterment is a sociological study in waiting.<sup>20</sup> Yet, it cannot be all-negative, as the Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson seems to think.<sup>21</sup> Nor can it be all big leaps of progress, with only a few stumbling blocks along the way, as the Thernstroms of Harvard seem to believe.<sup>22</sup> The correct mix seems to be somewhere in the middle, at a place where real life begins and ultimately ends for the majority of African Americans.

Abstractly, then, the quest for one position on a team roster of only ten to twelve positions total, does not seem to make much sense.<sup>23</sup> The odds are too high on simply making the team. Yet, in analyzing the data on salaries for NBA players in 1997, it invokes the image of the original logical man Mr. Robinson Crusoe lonely but peaceful sitting by himself on that island.<sup>24</sup> In a previous paper read before an audience of sport sociologists entitled "The Four Point Shot," I discussed<sup>25</sup> this issue of rationality, as I understand it, gleaned from the work of the French structuralist Maurice Godelier.<sup>26</sup> He feels, and I concur, that human beings act rationally when it is in their best interest to do so. Not otherwise.

With African American athletes the conditions that allow for the carrying out of rational behavior, may not be present at all times. Yet, these rationalities do play a part in their behavior applied to sports. And, while this is not surprising let me explain. The drive to succeed, not just play the game, is an inherent part of the strivings present in African

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19. See ROBERT PUTNAM, *MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK: CIVIC TRADITION IN MODERN ITALY* (1993). This work led to the publication of his more famous work "Bowling Alone." See also Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*, 6 *J. OF DEMOCRACY* 65 (1995).

20. The social-historical research was done by Du Bois. See Du Bois, *supra* note 11. Contemporary research lacks the rigor of the Philadelphia study and the focus must be replicated.

21. See Orlando Patterson, *The Issue is Poverty, Not Race Relations*, *NEWS & OBSERVER* (Raleigh, N.C.), Nov. 23, 1997.

22. See THERNSTROM & THERNSTROM, *supra* note 12.

23. The chances for attaining this professional status are growing, becoming larger. For example, for white males it is four in 100,000 and for African American males two in 100,000. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Playing For Keeps: Pleasure and Profits on the Postindustrial Playground*, in *THE HOUSE THAT RACE BUILT*, *supra* note 10, at 195.

24. Rousseau was so impressed with Daniel DeFoe and his character Crusoe that he called DeFoe's book "a marvelous book." See JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *BARTLETT'S FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS*. (16th ed., Justin Kaplan ed. 1992).

25. This paper is now a chapter in my forthcoming book, *THE SPORTING WORLD OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ATHLETES: FROM JACKIE ROOSEVELT ROBINSON TO ELDRICK "TIGER" WOODS* (1999).

26. See MAURICE GODELIER, *RATIONALITY AND IRRATIONALITY IN ECONOMICS* (1972).

American culture.<sup>27</sup> With the blockages to other and oftentimes more lucrative positions within the worlds of work, and the avenues of probabilities not being readily available, African American youth are quick to realize just where their main opportunities lay.<sup>28</sup> While it may sound strange to essentially agree that you go where the opportunities are found—even when the odds are stacked against you—I have come to see that this quest is not strange at all. In fact, in reading the excellent study on Jewish athletes, I learned that the wide range of individuals and groups, characters and values, which contributes to the success for Jewish athletes are, in fact, cultural attributes.<sup>29</sup> This aspect of culture—a love for sport, a yearning to be involved in the game—as outlined by Levine, has often been overlooked when it comes to African Americans.<sup>30</sup> Rudman, addressing this issue, makes a contribution that has gone almost unnoticed but has attracted my attention.<sup>31</sup> According to Rudman, African American culture is attracted to sport as a way of enhancing social prestige and economic position.<sup>32</sup> Sport, then, becomes an avenue that leads away from despair and no hope<sup>33</sup> to a life that has a future.<sup>34</sup>

### III. THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL BASKETBALL PLAYER

Today, the majority of players in the National Basketball Association are African American.

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27. See William Rudman, *Sport Mystique in Black Culture*, 3 SOC. SPORT J. 305 (1986).

28. See WILLIAM J. WILSON, *WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS: THE WORLD OF THE URBAN POOR* (1996).

29. See PETER LEVINE, *FROM ELLIS ISLAND TO EBBETTS FIELD: SPORTS AND THE AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE* (1996).

30. See *id.*

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. See Harry Edwards, *The Collegiate Athletic Arms Race*, in *FRACTURED FOCUS: SPORT AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIETY* 21 (Richard Lapchick ed. 1986). While the focus of Edwards' essay is on college athletes, he does say that the practice of "red-shirting" is commonplace in high schools and that on average, African American youth athletes are the least-prepared of all students entering the university system. *Id.*

34. See Michael Hughes & Melvin Thomas, *Race, Class, and Quality of Life in America, 1972 to 1996*, 63 AM. SOC. REV. 785 (1998).

RACIAL COMPOSITION OF PLAYERS IN THE NBA<sup>35</sup>  
(1991-1997)

1991-1992	Black	75%
	White	25%
	Foreign	N/A
1992-1993	Black	77%
	White	23%
	Foreign	N/A
1993-1994	Black	79%
	White	21%
	Foreign	7.90%
1994-1995	Black	82%
	White	18%
	Foreign	7.32%
1995-1996	Black	80%
	White	20%
	Foreign	8.25%
1996-1997	Black	79%
	White	20%
	Foreign	9.73%

The dominance of African Americans in professional basketball is so overwhelming that two scholars termed this sporting activity "The Black Man's Game."<sup>36</sup> They put it thus, "[p]rofessional basketball has for some time been considered by knowledgeable observers to be a 'black man's game.'"<sup>37</sup>

And, although African American males migrate to basketball early in the 20th century, they do so under different and very strange conditions. At the turn of the century, the natural habitat of basketball players, the outside court and/or the indoor gymnasium, are all but closed to this aspiring group of players.<sup>38</sup> And, while the Jim Crow laws of the South formally forbade such contact, these restrictions were not absent in the North.<sup>39</sup>

35. Center for the Study of Sport in Society, 1997 RACIAL REPORT CARD, Northeastern University (1998).

36. See James Koch & C. Warren Vander Hill, *Is There Discrimination in the Black Man's Game?*, 69 Soc. Sci. Q. 83 (1988).

37. *Id.*

38. For comparative purposes see similar conditions and restrictions imposed on Jewish players, at different points in time, see generally LEVINE, *supra* note 29.

39. See LORENZO GREENE, *THE NEGRO IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND* (1942), for the best account of the northern experience with Jim Crow. See also, Robin Kelley, *We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South*, 80 J. AM. HIST. 75 (1993).

Specifically, it should be noted that well into the 1950s and early 1960s, because of these Jim Crow laws, basketball players from Winston Salem State College could not play teams from Wake Forest University. The legal issues surrounding Black/White contact were immense. Conversely, athletic directors, coaches, and players from these two teams swore to secrecy the games that were in fact played under the cover of night. The stories behind these *formerly* secret, but legendary, games are just being told.<sup>40</sup>

#### IV. THE FOREIGN PLAYER IN THE NBA

Foreign athletes are not new to the sporting world of Americans.<sup>41</sup> This nation has always enjoyed a crop of athletes from other nations on these shores. Many arrive as student-athletes and attend some of the more prestigious universities in the land.<sup>42</sup>

For a long time it was routine to read about the athletic exploits of foreign athletes at Villanova, Fordham, New York University, Washington State University and many others. Many of these men, and more recently women, come to the US to wrestle, play baseball, softball, tennis, participate in track and field and cross country and some come to play basketball.

Yet, it is only with the success of the Kenyan long distance runners that a huge cry has gone out about the use of foreign athletes in American universities. Some of the loudest noise comes from some of the best American athletes.<sup>43</sup>

For years, in the Pacific Ten Conference the University of Washington competed with basketball players from Germany. At another Pac-10 institution the Oregon State University competed in basketball with

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40. "They came through a back door under the cover of midnight wearing high tops. Their schools wouldn't let them play this game. Society might have shunned a game in which blacks and whites mixed in a segregated city. . . Few people knew about the games that Wake Forest and Winston-Salem State played in the 1960s." Martin Kady, *Game Plan Was Top Secret*, WINSTON-SALEM J., March 22, 1998, at A9.

41. The great Irish milers of the 1950s and 1960s come to mind, especially those that ran for the New York Athletic Club during the legendary indoor track seasons of the 1950s and 1960s at Madison Square Garden and at the 169th street Armory. We need to be reminded that Villanova University, under the leadership of legendary track coach "Jumbo" Jim Elliott, had an extensive "Irish-Pipeline" of middle and long distance runners including, among others, the late Noel Carroll, Ron Delaney, Eamon Coghlan and Marcus O'Sullivan. The female distance star, Sonja O'Sullivan of Irish extraction also ran for Villanova.

42. In fact, a research project could be mounted that looks at ranked teams in all Division I schools, by specific sports. Many sports are defined by the number of foreign athletes who participate in them.

43. See Alberto Salazar, *Racing the Kenyans*, N.Y. TIMES, April 22, 1998, at A2.

players from the Caribbean region and many of the current (1990s) top ten university teams go to such far away places as Spain, Yugoslavia and Latin America to recruit their basketball players.

For example, in a recent *New York Times* story about foreign athletes we learn that while colleges have been recruiting foreign athletes for years, the quest to win is more necessary now than even the smaller, low-profile schools are recruiting overseas. The Dean of Students at St. Francis (Brooklyn, N. Y.) had this to say about the growing practice, “[p]ersonally I have mixed feelings. I am somewhat reluctant to see the nature of the team different than the nature of the student body it represents. If I had my druthers, I’d love to see everybody coming from Brooklyn.”<sup>44</sup>

The constellation, though, for St. Francis is that they want to be competitive.

## V. CONCLUSION

“You Can Observe a Lot by Watching.”

—Yogi Berra<sup>45</sup>

In my search for extant epistemological conditions that lead to the conditions of a rigorous proof, one of the conclusions I draw in this paper is that race matters in the NBA. The recent NBA “lockout” attests to this. When the issues got really heated in mid to late December, 1998, the players yelled foul and here they meant racism. Race became the mantle on which the union and individual players saw their future careers whittling away in front of their eyes. What we do know is that it is not the kind of racism that impacts inner-city African Americans who, when they can, work for substandard and oftentimes illegal wages.<sup>46</sup>

While it is hard to say *at what level* racism—as we know it— was at play during the NBA lockout, some of the current players feel that it did play a significant role. Listen:

I think there is a perception from the owners to even some fans that we’re blacks who should be happy with what we got, fair or not. There’s a lack of respect given us in large part because we’re

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44. Ron Dicker, *Schools Make International Effort*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 22, 1998, at D7.

45. LAWRENCE PETER “YOGI” BERRA, *THE YOGI BOOK: I REALLY DIDN’T SAY EVERYTHING I SAID* (1998).

46. See Rudman, *supra* note 27.

athletes. I'm not saying it's all about race, because it's not. But it plays a factor.<sup>47</sup>

I think the owners look at us as black, ghetto guys with tons of money that we don't deserve.<sup>48</sup>

Long time ex-Chicago Bulls coach, Phil Jackson chimed in, being one of the white coaches that the predominantly African American NBA players says disrespects them. Here is what Jackson had to say about the lockout and ongoing negotiations:

I'm not sure about the perspective of black versus white, but I don't think you have the same kind of intellectual thought process going on among these union leaders that the NBA once had. . . . We've got a group of players that haven't even finished college standing up there at the podium.<sup>49</sup>

And, I will add here that the arguments—pro and con—are starting to sound like and resemble the “strange career of affirmative action” arguments that have come to haunt good intentions towards leveling the playing field.<sup>50</sup>

As a sociologist, that is, as a scientist who recognizes sociology as a self-conscious and self-reflective enterprise, and as one of the first sciences to recognize that sociological endeavors occur within social structures and are shaped by social forces, let me say that while Du Bois saw the problem of the color line as the problem to be addressed in the 20th century, we will be a better off society if we purposefully address race issues in the 21st century.<sup>51</sup> This is another way of saying that almost nothing that William Edward Burghardt Du Bois analyzed in his early empirical sociological studies<sup>52</sup> and philosophized about in his popular 1903 book entitled *The Souls of Black Folk* has changed.

Furthermore, as the great New York Yankee Baseball Hall of Fame catcher, Yogi Berra who has become internationally famous for his aphorisms (Yogiisms), has commented, we need to observe, especially if we

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47. Selena Roberts & Mike Wise, *Both Sides in NBA Lockout Say Race Complicates Talks*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 16, 1998, at A1 (quoting Alonzo Mourning of the Miami Heat).

48. Allison Samuels, *Race, Respect and the NBA*, 132 NEWSWEEK, Dec. 21, 1998, at 55 (quoting Sam Cassell of the New Jersey Nets). [Editor's Note: Since this article was written, Sam Cassell has become a member of the Milwaukee Bucks.]

49. Roberts & Wise, *supra* note 47, at A1 (quoting Phil Jackson, ex-Chicago Bulls Coach).

50. See Jennifer Hochschild, *The Strange Career of Affirmative Action*, forthcoming in OHIO ST. L. J. (1999) (copy on file with author). Ms. Hochschild writes one of the best analyses of the “strange” policies of Affirmative Action.

51. See Edwards, *supra* note 18.

52. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Laboratory in Sociology at Atlanta University*, 21 THE ANNALS OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE 503 (1903).

are looking at the interaction of humans in American society. In essence what Dr. Berra has said, “[o]bservation yields new insights into social phenomena.”<sup>53</sup> So true, yet far from use in contemporary sociological analysis of the sporting arena.

If team owners and coaches conspire to bring more and more white, foreign players to the college and professional game of basketball, then the African American players, who have become a staple across two decades, will disappear from the game.

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53. BERRA, *supra* note 45.