

ANTI-RACISM IN SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

*Edited by:
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Chapter 6

Athlete Branding in the 21st Century: Former Athletes' Voices and Vision for More Education and Life After Sport Content, Messaging, and Representations

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Abstract

The branding of athletes has a long history and has received a great deal of scholarly attention in certain epistemological areas. However, one of the gaps in the research literature is the former athlete's scholarly and applied perspective on the continuum of high school sport to the professional level. While this is inherently a United States of America (USA) perspective, implications may be relevant to other nations. This chapter focuses on filling a gap in the research and applied literature related to athlete branding in terms of examining life during and after sport and "real-time" cases of athletes' attributes. The resulting discussion extends beyond the scope of athletic prowess and offers future theoretical directions and practice for scholars and sport managers. The goal of this approach is to influence positive change(s) with the athlete's brand in both theory and practice.

Keywords: brand, race, sport, education, life after sport

The neoliberal makeover and refinements to the state of intercollegiate athletics, in reply to a complex crisis of schooling Black student athletes, has enabled an undeterred investment in instruments of policy and programming for production of knowledge capitalism through which people are reimagined and reconstructed as human capital and economic entrepreneurs of their own lives, including the quality of their education. The institutions of higher education and intercollegiate athletics have been all but immune to the marketization of education. (Bimper, 2020, p. 156)

Athlete Branding Overview

Athletes are some of the most visible racial and ethnic identities in society across all global nations and cultures, from school systems to organized and informal sports. As citizens in the United States of America (USA) and the world, we are bombarded with images and representations of athletes. Athlete branding cultivates messages and products from food/beverage to technology to fashion. However, less attention to athlete branding systemically (theory and practice) focuses on education and the holistic aspects of athletes in the culture. Thus, this chapter poses the following questions: (a) What might one glean from the research literature on athlete branding? (b) What theory or theories encompass the current chapter's thesis? and (c) What gaps are there in the research literature that the current paper could

fill, especially in terms of education, athlete branding, and race?

As participant observers, i.e., three of the four co-authors of the current paper are former competitive collegiate athletes at nearly every level, how might our perspective offer a unique bridge between sport management scholars and practitioners on the topic of athlete branding? We begin in the next section by briefly reviewing the literature on athlete branding.

Brief Review of Literature

The first inquiry of the chapter requires compilation and evaluation. What might one glean from the research literature on athlete branding? Researchers and scholars have paid great attention to the subject of athlete branding. This attention primarily focuses on the areas of career transition and retired athletes (Bernes et al., 2009; Taniyev & Gordon, 2019), women (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015; Lobpries et al., 2018), social and new media (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2012; Doyle et al., 2020; Hodge & Walker, 2015; Su et al., 2020), philanthropy (Kunkel et al., 2020), psychometric scales (Arai et al., 2013), athlete brand images (Arai et al., 2014; Emmons & Mocarski, 2014; Hasaan et al., 2020; Razvan & Catalin, 2018) and sport-brand architecture (Williams et al., 2015).

These empirical and theoretical papers have contributed to the research literature in key ways. Branding impacts all athletes at each level of competition, and there are differences based on gender and sexual orientation even with the passing of Title IX 50 years ago. The impact of social media on modern athletes deserves the attention of scholars and practitioners who work with athletes in team and business capacities. Yet, the educational outcomes of these branded sporting identities are often overlooked. How athletes are positioned with community, charities, etc., is as important as measuring the perceptions of athlete branding through empiricism. The images of athletes create a continuum over time of emotion, nostalgia, and access to the fans that consume their representations. The perception of gender equality allows women and men involved in sport to have the opportunity to compete in the classroom. In these settings, the baseline of performance attributes is up to each individual—to achieve intellectually with their brains and brawn. In the next section, we synthesize how cultural memory theories align with the need for researchers to inform the best practices of higher education with cultural representations that humanize athletes.

Theory on Cultural Memory, Race, and Sport

History is not only about the past but also about the contemporary and the future. Assmann (1995) refers to our collective memory of history as reflexivity in his work on cultural identity. Cultural memory is reflexive in three ways: (a) it is practice-reflexive in that it interprets common practice through proverbs, maxims, “ethno-theories” to use Bourdieu’s term, rituals (for instance, sacrificial rites that interpret the practice of hunting), and so on; (b) it is self-reflexive in that it draws on itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, surpass, and receive hypothetically; and (c) it is reflexive of its image insofar as it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its social system.

Similarly, the cultural memory of athlete branding in America contains both the past and the present. History is as much about today as it is yesterday (Thomas, 2018). In terms of yesterday, one of the most lucrative sport commodities has been the African American male. This exploitation of Black male productivity for labor has a long history in sport and society (Hawkins, 2010). Researchers have recently centered their theory and practice around the productive aspects of education, race, and sport for the Black male athlete (Cooper, 2016). However, the notion of scholar-athlete excellence in African American male culture is not new.

Consider McMahon’s take on education, race, and sport through the iconic Duke Slater, an alumnus of Iowa. While lengthy, it is pertinent to convey the capacity of athlete branding to include holistic aspects

of athletes in the culture:

Slater's career after college also sparkled. After graduating from Iowa in 1921, he played professional football in the 1930s. He also returned to Iowa in the 1920s to study law. He earned his law degree in 1928 and later became a respected judge in Chicago. He returned to Iowa frequently, giving public speeches and attending Hawkeye football games. Slater also helped to recruit Black players—by his image and through personal contact. More than just a living legend, he identified and evaluated Black talent and sent it Iowa's way. Slater is arguably the most influential and enduring legend of all African-American athletes at Iowa. In 1972 the university dedicated a dormitory in his honor, Slater Hall. (McMahon, 2001, p. 77)

The influence of Slater's actions promoted anti-racism in sport organizations before empirical literature on the topic was ever documented. Still, his actions and attitudes remain an enduring element of the cultural memory of Black excellence in collegiate sport.

Studies parallel to the current chapter's thesis examine how athletes are presented in advertising and other cultural platforms. This research by other scholars focuses on the stereotypes and stigmas of athletes in a society that often sees this population as physical beings, not mental, strategic, and/or humans that are interlocutors. For example, the work of Edwards (1984) illuminates that the brain attributes of athletes, especially African American male athletes, are often missing or erased in media and marketing content. Dyson (2021) has also critically addressed that "balling out" extends beyond the physical talents and gifts of athletes (especially Black men) that many audience viewers gaze at; the art and science with the merger of intellect and athleticism are not a duality.

The specific literature on athlete branding, primarily from sport management and sport studies scholars, tends to focus on the bodies of Black male athletes in predominantly White spaces. Our current chapter contribution adds to theory and practice—the case exemplars of current and former athletes from high school to professionals advance cultural reflexivity and give sport managers applied strategies to brand athletes through various platforms. This includes high school counselors, academic support units in higher education and intercollegiate athletics, and player engagement and development specialists at the collegiate and professional levels.

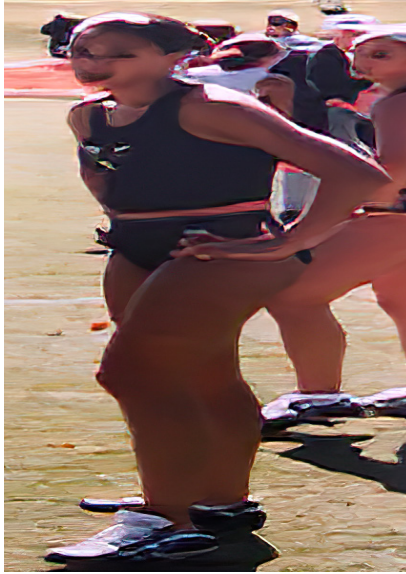
It is important that our chapter highlights athletes from all backgrounds, sports, and identity perspectives. However, revenue sports such as men's basketball and football are the most visible in the USA and across the globe. Other studies run counter to the current chapter's thesis and focus. For example, some researchers have found that male athletes receive more attention and branding than female athletes. However, we should ask what type of media content and attention is being constructed. The current authors did their best to include women athletes and their branding attributes that combine cognitive and athletic skills through the visual texts earlier, as well as the descriptions of each athlete as a human being.

Practical Applications for Sport Managers

The systemic messages about the scope of an athlete's identity beyond sport are limited. In short, they are in dire need of a branding makeover that promotes education. Policies and institutions, e.g., National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), that cultivate this messaging would enable the structural focus on athleticism to shift in a culturally relevant way toward education and achievements beyond the athletic competition. Examples of these structural policies will be discussed at the conclusion of this chapter. To understand the necessity of these structural policies, best practices for sport managers are given at diverse levels of athletic competition, as discussed in the following pages.

Professional Cases: Sport and Professionals

All athletes will exit from sport at some point in their lives, regardless of the level of competition. However, some athletes understand this transition and embrace the workforce (Boyd et al., 2021). As such, we synthesize a visual litany of former athletes in what will hopefully become “athletic vintage” as the years pass. These images demonstrate traits and characteristics across diverse sporting experiences that all have the potential for transferable skills. Some of these images also represent educational content that is missing from the popular text of today’s athletes—and yesterday’s athletes.



Dr. Jacqueline Schuman, former elite track and field scholar-athlete at Vanderbilt University and the Director of Athletics and Recreation at UMASS-Boston.



Krisztina Szabo is a current Ph.D. student (Industrial Organizational Psychology) at UCF in Orlando, Florida, and is originally from Hungary.



Dr. Amanda Schweinbenz is a tenured professor and former competitive rower in college (Canada). Photo courtesy from the Paul Robeson Research Center for Innovative Academic & Athletic Prowess at UCF.

The Case of Dr. George Jewett: Contemporary College Nostalgia

In addition to the value of intercollegiate athletics in higher education, one way to integrate the message of academic and athletic prowess is through contemporary nostalgia. In 2021, the first author of this chapter was one of the advisors who assisted with the design of a trophy with so much meaning and nuances. In February 2021, Michigan and Northwestern University announced the establishment of the first rivalry game trophy named for an African American student-athlete in Football Bowl Subdivision History (FBS). The schools partnered to honor Dr. George Jewett (MD), an alumnus of both universities and the first African American to play for both football programs. The George Jewett Trophy will be played each time the two programs meet on the football field (see picture below).

Jewett played for Michigan during the 1890 and 1892 seasons, enrolling at the university after being named valedictorian at Ann Arbor High (now Ann Arbor Pioneer High School), where he was a stand-out in track, football, and baseball. Fluent in four languages, Jewett studied medicine while starring on the gridiron for the Wolverines as a fullback, a halfback, and the team's main kicker. However, he left Michigan for Northwestern in 1893 due to racism and UM's medical school not allowing him admission to their medical school to finish his medical degree. While in Evanston, he also lettered and starred in football for the Wildcats for two seasons, including a four-touchdown performance against his undergraduate alma mater Michigan. After graduation, Jewett became a doctor in Chicago before returning to Ann Arbor in 1899. He coached briefly at Michigan Agricultural College and Oliver and later started a dry cleaning and pressing business on State Street. Unfortunately, Jewett's life was cut short, as he died in 1908 at 38, leaving behind a wife and two sons.

Several primary sources in yearbook comments are worth noting. The first comment is about Jewett's role in promoting diversity and inclusion in and out of the sport context: "This is a historic moment in major college football history," said Warde Manuel, UM's Donald R. Shepherd Director of Athletics. He went on to write:

We are proud to partner with our peer institution, Northwestern, to recognize and honor an African American pioneer in George Jewett. George achieved at a high level as a scholar, athlete and doctor. His

hard work and effort led to success not only for himself, but for those who would follow a similar path after him. His excellence at two Big Ten institutions as a student, athlete and citizen is something we want our current student-athletes to aspire to during their collegiate. The George Jewett Trophy will become a proud celebration of the importance to diversity and inclusion on our teams, campuses, and to our society. (Michigan football yearbook, 2021)

Jewett’s branding image would have been one of a holistic person who used both his mind and his body to position himself as a positive influence on the next generation.

The second comment noted Jewett’s mark on the cultural memory of anti-racism in sport organizations. “Dr. George Jewett’s academic, athletic, community and cultural accolades transcend time,” stated Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren. Remarking on his excellence as a scholar and athlete, Warren continued:

Dr. Jewett’s dedication and perseverance to achieve excellence in every area of his life are an inspiration to every man and woman and provide evidence that with hard work and passion there are no limitations to achieving your dreams. We must continue to work together to honor Dr. Jewett by eliminating racism and hate and creating equality in our society. (Michigan Football Yearbook, 2021)

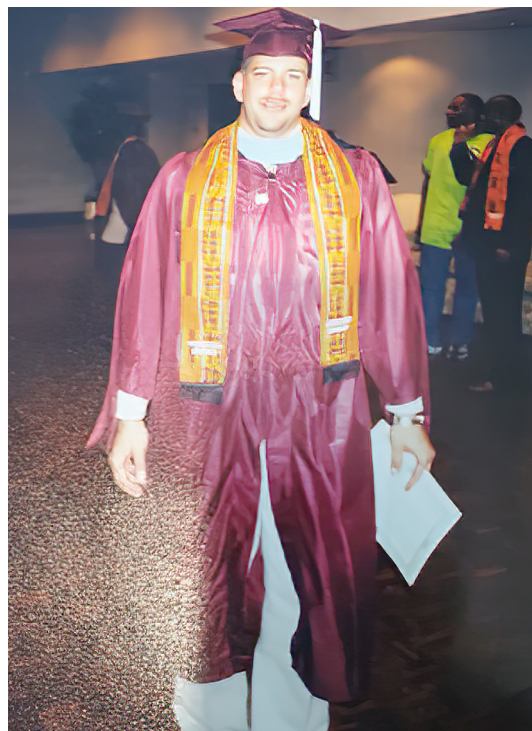
This holistic image of Dr. Jewett challenges the traditional ways we see sports participants. Learning about the cerebral attributes of athletes should be integrated into the systemic messages about the scope of an athlete’s identity beyond sport.



Photo courtesy from the Paul Robeson Research Center for Innovative Academic & Athletic Prowess at UCF. October 2021. Pictured left to right are Dr. Derrick Gragg (former football player at Vanderbilt University), Doug Gnodtke (Chief of Staff at UM), Warde Manuel (former football player at UM), and Dr. C. Keith Harrison (first author of this paper and former offensive center in football West Texas A&M University).

Community Colleges: Overlooked and Under-resourced

Jean Boyd and Cliff Parks are two best friends from southern California. They met in 1986 at Paramount High School. Growing up in Compton, both African American men are success stories, and as former athletes, their achievements need to be branded through education (see pictures below). The first author of the current paper met both men in 1990 while a first-year assistant football coach at Cerritos Community College and in graduate school at California State University, Dominguez Hills.



High School Cases: Planting and Growing the Seeds Early



Issues of name, branding image, and likeness do not only affect collegiate and professional sports. In the lower levels of athletic competition in the United States, the Name Image and Likeness (NIL) movement will continue to escalate. As various stakeholders strategically build business models that monetize the potential realities of high-profile recruits, the pre-college representations of scholastic individuals become more pertinent to athlete branding. The next four individuals are highlighted in high school at different stages of their schooling lives. All four are recent A students and stellar athletes in at least one varsity sport.

Tre Harrison has focused his physical and intellectual talents on the field with an emphasis on his high “football IQ.” Along with his academic pursuits, these attributes are the type of athlete branding needed in the 21st Century. His first offer is from Boston College.



Josh Hunter, an outstanding scholar, has signed a full athletic scholarship at San Diego State University. He will major in international business with a minor in entrepreneurship. He started varsity for four years at Mater Dei High School in California, one of the top high schools in the nation for academics and athletics) Hunter was a two-time defensive player of the year in the Trinity League, one of the best in the nation for competitive scholastic athletes. Hunter has also earned Athlete of the Year at Mater Dei High School.



Braelon Tate signed a scholarship with Colorado Mines, one of the top engineering schools in the country. Most of the football players at this Division II school major in engineering, and the team is very competitive, ascending to the playoffs consistently each year with a peer group of academic and athletic excellence. In addition, Tate has a strong family lineage: his parents are successful business leaders, his uncle is a famous professor, and his grandparents are pioneer educators and sportswriters in Atlanta's southern community.



Tate Lampman is a star scholar-athlete in soccer whose parents are both successful in education and business.

Discussion and Future Research

We have reached the final inquiry. What contribution to the research literature does this chapter fill for education, athlete branding, and race? Our theoretical and practical contributions include educational achievement and success beyond physical intelligence in athlete branding. Much of the athlete branding research literature focuses on areas that overlook educational themes and career transition representations that expand athletic identities beyond the playing fields, gyms, diamonds, and rowing waters. While the body of literature on athlete branding is important and plentiful (see the brief review of the literature section earlier in this paper), the intellectualism/cerebral attributes of athletes are where the gap in the research is more apparent. The NIL movement will intensify the need for researchers to inform the best practices of higher education with cultural representations that humanize athletes.

Education is not the only theme or approach that leaders can utilize. Iconic scholar-activist Professor Emeritus Harry Edwards critiques how plans could play out and are already playing out in the last decade, especially for numerous African Americans in sport:

While education was seen as plan B, the 20th Century was dominated by our role and images as athletes. It will be our minds, not our bodies that will determine our image, place, status in the arena of life over the 21st Century and there will be no Plan B. (Edwards, 2010, personal communication)

The evolution of Black athletes in the larger sociocultural context is evidenced in the changing branding that is already happening at each level of competition.

Future research should examine the career transition of athletes in geographical contexts. For example, Canada, Europe, Asia, China, Portugal, Italy, etc., all have environments that warrant unique and nuanced analyses related to athletes and branding aspects of their identity. Furthermore, aspects of racial and gender dynamics should be explored at the apex of academic perceptions, stereotypes, and stigmas about African American males in revenue sports, women in sport, Women of Color in sport, and BIPOC identities in sports where ethnic minorities are not typically perceived to achieve on and off the field. Finally, the intersectionality of branding with male and female athletes, especially with covert racism and sexism constructs, should be linked and compared at all levels of sporting competition.

Conclusions

Policy recommendations have the potential to impact athlete branding on a macro level. These policies should hone in on systemic mechanisms to brand the holistic aspects of athletes (e.g., print media, advertising, television) in high school, community college, university, and professional levels. This would allow us to maximize many platforms to create, cultivate, and even bombard society with images of athletes that educate, inform, and challenge traditional ways that we see sport participants. Branding in the 21st Century has untapped cultural aspects that have never been seen in previous eras. Social media, the Internet, and consumption in the contemporary world will continue to engage audiences. Why not engage our audiences with different narratives about athletes with new rituals and traditions about the perceptions of a unique identity with a rich branding history. Branding the mind, body, and soul of the athlete can only create a win/win for all that cheer, boo, and admire this human being with many talents in addition to athletic ones.

Coda (from the first author of the paper)

As a participant-observer (first author of the paper), I have a uniquely valuable view of the athlete from youth to high school to community college to pro to retirement for those lucky few blessed enough to make it professionally. Sport ends sooner than later, so athlete branding should reflect this cultural and social reality while simultaneously marketing, branding, and representing diverse attributes of the athlete across intelligence, career goals, and community impact. One of the areas where more research is

needed is around family, education, and athlete branding. My parents pushed education in concert with my sport participation from youth through college and graduate school. More practitioners should brand educational lessons from the parents of athletes, create, document, etc., representations of athletes with academic symbols (e.g., degrees, cap, gown), and include their parents when appropriate.



Professor Skip Gates, world-known Harvard Professor of African and African American studies at the Hutchins Center, captured my feelings below when he was quoted as saying: “That is one of the most powerful images I have ever seen” (Gates, 2020, during Harrison’s Harvard Nasir Jones Hip Hop Fellows Colloquial presentation). Professor Gates was referring to the prideful look on my father’s face at my graduation from West Texas A&M in 1990 after playing football (center) for two years after transferring from Cerritos community college. Mr. Harrison and my mother (Mrs. Harrison) always ensured that I was about my business with equal parts weighted—academic and athletic.

Left to right Mr. Claude Harrison and his son C. Keith Harrison, August 1990, West Texas A&M University graduation at the Amarillo Convention Center.

Acknowledgments

All photos courtesy from the Paul Robeson Research Center for Innovative Academic & Athletic Prowess at UCF.

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