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African American Student Athletes as African American Role Models

Maureen Smith

California State University, Sacramento

On many campuses, Black students remain a minority. “While their talent and impact on the athletic program has certainly increased...their athletic ability remains their primary mission or ‘perceived’ primary mission on the campus.”

When the all white basketball team from the University of Kentucky lost to UTEP, whose starting five were student athletes of color, in the 1966 NCAA championship, Kentucky coach Adolph Rupp was forced to recognize the tremendous talent of African American athletes. Rupp was still adamantly opposed to recruiting student athletes of color for his athletic team, a prejudice based on fear and ignorance, and resulting in a major loss for his program. African American athletes were becoming more visible on predominantly white colleges and universities, largely due to three factors; first, the conflict around the desegregation of the white campus and white athletic teams; second, the great impact these black athletes had on the athletic programs and the academic cynicism that surrounded their arrival on campus; and finally, the increased awareness of race issues during the decade of the civil rights movement.

Thirty years later, while desegregation is not the issue, Black student athletes and Black students remain a minority on many campuses across the country. While their talent and impact on the athletic programs has certainly increased in both the number of participants and the accomplishments in the athletic arena, their athletic ability remains their primary mission or "perceived" primary mission on the campus with speculation around their arrival on campus remaining controversial with NCAA rules and regulations such as Prop 48.

This paper is the result of a class assignment for a Black Studies course, Black Role Models. The course focused on Afrocentric principles and how this optimal thinking could be incorporated into all aspects of life. Using the principles of optimal thought and Afrocentricity, African American student athletes were interviewed on their perceptions of being a Black athlete on a white campus, their feelings on being a Black role model, their thoughts on their own responsibilities to the Black community, as well as other topics that came out in the course of the discussion. The interviews speak for themselves, with one football player exhibiting great insight when he said, "It is very hard to be Afrocentric in this place, meaning (this school) and this country. There is already one strike against me when you see my color, I'm Black-but to wear a dashiki or big beads, it doesn't fit in." These interviews took place during the same time a Black student organization on campus was threatening to send letters detailing the racial problems on the campus to Black athletes being recruited by the school's athletic department. The paper concludes by looking at the efforts of the athletic department to "meet" the needs of student athletes of color. With many larger athletic departments and the NCAA spending

a considerably larger amount of time figuring out how to make more money from the efforts of their student athletes, the movement to appreciate and celebrate the African American student athlete experience remains a task for those committed to a more equitable campus setting, which included social, academic and athletic development.

PRESENTER

Maureen Smith is an assistant professor in the Health and Physical Education department at California State University, Sacramento. She teaches two undergraduate courses: "Sport and Aging" and "Sociology of Sport," and a graduate seminar, "Sport in Society." She is currently developing several courses for the General Education curriculum, including a sport history/sociology course on the role of the African American athlete in the 20th century and a course on race and gender in sport film and fiction. She is also active in developing curriculum for student athletes at the high school and college levels. Smith graduated from Ithaca College with a degree in physical education and a master's degree in sport psychology / coaching behaviors. She completed a master's degree in Black studies at the Ohio State University, where she is completing her doctorate in sport studies. Her dissertation focuses on the achievement of American citizenship through sport for Black athletes and the double-consciousness many Black athletes felt during the 1960's. Using the written works of W.E.B. DuBois and Black scholars of the 1960's, several Black athletes and their expressions of race and national identity are explored within the context of the writings and the larger civil rights movement.