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Philly Hoop Dreams: The Social Organization of Black Basketball in Philadelphia

Abstract

A study of basketball in Philadelphia suggests that players are made, not born and that success is not based solely upon the efforts of an individual. Rather, success is heavily influenced by the operations of a local social network.

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RACE, SPORTS, AND SOCIETY SESSION

This ethnographic study describes the social organization of black basketball in Philadelphia. Black basketball is specified because black males represent a disproportionate percentage of professional basketball players and I want to understand generally why this is so and how the organization of basketball in predominantly black communities might continue this trend. I have selected one league in Philadelphia as my focus because of its local and national reputation. The league is also a good research site because its participants come primarily from black communities throughout Philadelphia. A study of this Philadelphia basketball league suggests that basketball players are made, not born and that success is not based solely upon the efforts of an individual. Rather, success is made by the operations of a social network; where information is disseminated, lessons are taught and role models are introduced and utilized by a social network that is organized around Philadelphia basketball. A study of an effective social network operating in a poor, urban community is significant because poor blacks have been criticized for lacking effective social networks, outside of church and/ or religious affiliated networks, for getting work; which might increase their ability to augment resources of wealth and power.

Basketball is a city game. Philadelphia has a rich basketball history, similar to other urban cities like New York. Basketball has been played in Philadelphia since the 1920s, a time in which the South Philadelphia Hebrew All- Stars were considered the third best team in the nation behind two New York teams, one of which was all black. Early statistics on professional basketball indicate that players have disproportionately come from urban cities since the 1940s, Philadelphia. More than 50 Philadelphia natives have made it to the professional basketball ranks and nine have been selected to the Hall of Fame, including Wilt Chamberlain and Earl lithe Pearl" Monroe. This study answers the general question of why basketball remains a viable option among blacks in Philadelphia, specifically examining the roles of a formal and informal basketball network. A black urban network exists in Philly that serves the common role of a sports league; to provide youth with a place where they can have legal and safe fun and where they can learn key American values such as teamwork, discipline, hard work and sportsmanship. This formal network also acts as an information base for youth, teaching them how to play basketball, the role of education in athletics and how athletics can be used as a gatekeeper for other opportunities, enhancing their mobility potential. Moreover, the formal network

symbolizes a local tradition of basketball in Philadelphia promoting basketball players as role models. The informal network built around basketball in Philadelphia disseminates information about basketball and older Philadelphia players, to youth through stories and boasts that it knows how to produce professional talent based upon its role in some "success stories". The informal network nurtures some of the talented young players, emphasizing hard work and dedication, so they may be "discovered" or ascend the basketball ranks. The network also acts as a support network for youth throughout their lives. The significance of identifying one of Philly's black basketball social networks is that it illustrates how blacks have established a social network that encourages sport because it may enhance mobility and take advantage of an economic opportunity or niche for young black males. In this manner, Philly's black basketball social network is much like a network that enhances one's ability to get a job; its informal social ties provide the strongest bonds and connections for mobility in basketball and key information is exchanged through this network which advantages black male youths. The networks also serve high schools, colleges and professional basketball leagues, these youth may participate in, by identifying talented basketball players that may not have been otherwise located.

Presenter

Scott N. Brooks is currently pursuing his doctoral degree in Sociology from the University of Pennsylvania. Scott's academic areas of interest include: sociology of sport, urban studies and experiences of work. He was raised in California and is a graduate of California State University-Hayward (M.A. in Sociology) and University of California-Berkeley (B.A. in Political Economics of Industrial Societies). He is married to wife, Kara, with whom he has two young boys, Kenan and Clay Ali.