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The Minority Student-Athlete In A Predominantly White Institution: Student-Athletes Discuss Their Perspectives

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“The most striking thing I felt when I first arrived at this school was that everything was white.”

The experiences of minority student-athletes in predominately white institutions cannot be represented as complete from the viewpoints of few minority athletes in one predominately white since institutions are structured by different principles and ran by different people. As a result, this paper will focus on the personal experiences of selected minority student-athletes at Principia College. The principal author for this paper called nine minority student-athletes from the school to discuss the difficulties they face and what can be done to minimize them. He also gathered input from white students to understand the situation better since the situation cannot be accurately determined in isolation. Some of the difficulties identified during this paper are different environment, teammate acceptance, communication between the minority athletes and their teammates and coaches, pressure for being different, and self-consciousness. These identified difficulties will be explored in the paper along with possible ways the authors suggest this dilemma can be minimized, if not resolved.

"The most striking thing I felt when I first arrived at this school was that everything was white," noted one of the authors. Ninety-eight percent of the people were white, their behaviors and lifestyles were white, their talk was white, and above all, they hung out in white groups. As a result, all my team mates were white. The environment was almost symmetrically opposite from what I am used to. The freedom to be myself was not there—there were no home boys to call and discuss team issues with. I was isolated from the other club members—I seem to be visible only on the field and not before. The change in environment was almost intimidating. After hearing my story, a minority soccer player summed it up with his experience, "I was not comfortable-playing the game at first." This overwhelming change in environment challenges the minority student to try to integrate into the system—to make friends with his or her team mates and others as soon as possible. Then arises the second difficulty: teammate acceptance.

To be accepted by team mates, minority student-athletes must be good in whatever sport they are playing. If they are less fortunate, struggling toward athletic development, then it is more difficult for them to integrate into the social spectrum of their team mates. I agree

with most of the students I spoke with when they said, as a minority student athlete, the team mates already assume that you are an achiever in the sport. To understand the mentality of some of the white boys at the school, I spoke with a football player. He said most people (teammates) feel that people of color are athletic by nature and are expected to have mastered whatever sport they are playing. And so, the minority athletes gain respect or disrespect from their team mates depending on how they perceive them, he explained. Nevertheless, a female minority student explained that sometimes, the gap that exists between the minority athlete and their team mates is due to confusion as a result of ignorance about how to interact with each other. She explained that most of the athletes in the school have never been around a minority student of color before and therefore do not know how to interact amicably. And that, often, the minority student-athlete does not understand his or her team mates enough to hang out with them comfortably either. As a result of this, she said, the white boys hang out with their peers and the students of color hang out together. But in a school like ours where there may be only one student of color on a team, that student feels cut off or not part of the social interactions of his or her team mates. Another student-athlete said, "the feeling is more like being singled-out." This acceptance issue is compounded with yet another one—the minority student athlete is noticed almost immediately among his or her team mates.

The problem with being noticed, another student-athlete explained, is that the attention creates a lot of mental pressure on the athlete - his or her mistakes and achievements are magnified as a result. The athlete becomes self-conscious and is forced to work harder to satisfy these expectations. When the athlete cannot satisfy these expectations, he or she feels like a failure. As a result, many minority athletes cease to play for the school because they cannot stand such pressure. As one of the co-authors explained, the situation sometimes feels so frustrating that he questions why he should continue playing football for the school. For him, the one thing that gets him going is his love for the game. The problems faced by the minority student in this school are by no means exhausted in this short paper, but I believe that some of the mental struggles that he or she goes through have been dearly called to mind.

The author suggests two possible ways to help minority students to be better off mentally—with less stress, with less pressure, and able to play their college sport without inhibition as their white counterparts are able to do. This is especially true for institutions like ours where less than 2% of the student population are students of color. The first suggestion is that the school should make extra effort to recruit minority athletes. "I personally believe that the school has been trying to do this, but their efforts have not been very fruitful." noted the principal author. This will help minimize the feelings of isolation that were discussed above.

Another suggestion is that the school should open an athletic counseling office where students are encouraged to go and discuss their feelings. This office should help both the white and minority students to open up and interact with each other. The establishment of this office and its activities will help enlighten students and so minimize the "ignorance" that Brooke mentioned earlier. The office should be able to address the expectation that an athlete must already be accomplished because he or she is a person of color. This

understanding will also help the coaches see the potential of a serious athlete and make him or her even better in the sport.

The principal author concludes, "I believe the problems faced by the minority student-athlete can be further reduced if the two suggested solutions, in conjunction with other existing programs, are put into practice in institutions like Principia College. I am very proud of the athletes of color (too numerous to mention) who passed through even more challenging situations to become what they are today. We hear about them everyday and they continue to forge ahead—still achieving. And I have faith that minority students of color will continue to excel in their chosen field of sport, regardless of the challenges they face."

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