
RESEARCH NOTES

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An Investigation of Campus Stereotypes: The Myth of Black Athletic Superiority and the Dumb Jock Stereotype

Gary A. Sailes
Indiana University

This investigation examined the beliefs of college students regarding specific stereotypes about African American athletes and about college student-athletes. Beliefs about intelligence, academic integrity, and academic competitiveness among male college student-athletes, as well as assumptions about intelligence, academic preparation, style of play, competitiveness, physical superiority, athletic ability, and mental temperament in African American athletes, were investigated. A fixed alternative questionnaire was administered to 869 graduate and undergraduate students. The findings indicate that white and male students believe that athletes are not as intelligent as the typical college student and that they take easy courses to maintain their eligibility and that African American athletes are not academically prepared to attend college, are not as intelligent and do not receive as high grades as white athletes, and are generally temperamental. African American and female students believe that African American athletes are more competitive and have a different playing style than white athletes.

Cette étude porte sur les croyances des universitaires en terme de stéréotypes concernant les athlètes de couleur et les étudiants-athlètes de niveau universitaire. Plus particulièrement, l'étude est centrée sur les croyances en terme d'intelligence, d'intégrité académique et de compétitivité académique des étudiants-athlètes masculins; et les croyances en terme d'intelligence, de formation académique, de style de jeu, de compétitivité, de supériorité physique, d'habileté sportive et de tempérament des athlètes masculins de couleur. Un questionnaire fut rempli par 869 étudiants et étudiantes au baccalauréat et à la maîtrise. Les résultats indiquent que les étudiants de race blanche croient que (a) les étudiants-athlètes ne sont pas aussi intelligents que l'étudiant universitaire typique et qu'ils choisissent des cours faciles pour rester éligibles pour leur sport et (b) que les athlètes de couleur n'ont pas la formation académique nécessaire pour aller à l'université, ne sont pas aussi intelligents, n'obtiennent pas des notes aussi élevées que les athlètes de race blanche et ont généralement des tempéraments difficiles. De plus, les étudiants de couleur et les étudiantes croient que les athlètes de couleur sont plus compétitifs en sport et ont un style de jeu différent de celui des athlètes de race blanche.

Sport has become an extremely important part of American culture. The pervasiveness and importance of American sport have grown with increased media coverage (Leonard, 1988, p. 413). Consequently, however, the growth of

Gary A. Sailes is with the Department of Kinesiology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405.

American sport has contributed to the evolution of specific sports stereotypes and myths, most notably the "dumb jock" stereotype and the myth of athletic superiority among African American athletes, in intercollegiate and professional sports.¹

Sports Stereotypes

Dumb Jock Stereotype

The historical origins of the dumb jock stereotype can be traced to 500 B.C., when Greek athletes were criticized for the inordinate amount of time they used in preparation for competition and for neglecting their intellectual development. Greek athletes were characterized by some philosophers of the period as useless and ignorant citizens with dull minds (Coakley, 1990, p. 46).

Recent media attention challenging the scholarship of college athletes, particularly in the revenue-producing sports of basketball and football, has tainted the academic credibility of college student-athletes. Reports of high school student-athletes not meeting National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) minimum academic standards to establish college eligibility, accounts of college student-athletes failing their courses, and the particularly low graduation rates among major college basketball and football programs foster the belief that anti-intellectualism exists among college student-athletes. Concurrently, Hollywood movies (Org in *Revenge of the Nerds, I & II*), television situation comedies (Coach in "Cheers"; "Coach"), and television commercials (including some for athletic shoes) perpetuate and profit from the dumb jock image, facilitating its acceptance among the American public.

Beezley (1983) chronicled the development of the dumb jock stereotype traditionally associated with college football players. Although the dumb jock stereotype was prevalent in American sports culture, its origin and validity could not be confirmed. Similarly, Nixon (1982) found no evidence to support the stereotype of the dumb jock. McMartin and Klay (1983) had similar findings and also reported that positive and favorable attitudes were held about students who were also athletes. Lederman (1990, p. A29) reported that regardless of the low graduation rates of football and basketball players, the overall grade point averages and graduation rates for college student-athletes were slightly higher than for the ordinary college student. Although prevalent, the dumb jock stereotype appears to have no scientific basis.

Racial Stereotyping

A 1988 investigative report by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* sought to answer the question, Are African Americans better athletes than whites? (Sokolove, 1988). Similarly, a 1989 NBC special program hosted by Tom Brokaw, entitled "The Black Athlete: Fact or Fiction," focused on a related question: What

¹Throughout this paper, the term *athletes* refers specifically to male athletes. The stereotypes under consideration are not nearly as well developed for female athletes, and this study focused specifically on male athletes.

accounts for the success of African American athletes in American sports? Davis (1990) argued that the need to analyze African American success in sport is a racist preoccupation emanating from fear generated within the white status quo. African Americans comprise 12% of the total population in the United States; however, a disproportionately higher number of African American athletes participate on college and professional teams in the three major revenue-producing sports (basketball, baseball, and football). Approximately 21% of professional baseball players, 73% of the players in the National Basketball Association, and 57% of the athletes in the National Football League are African American (Coakley, 1990, p. 208). The NCAA (1989) reported that virtually all the colleges participating in Division I basketball and football have integrated teams and nearly all the records in the three major sports at the college and professional levels are held by African Americans.

Unsubstantiated race-oriented sports myths have evolved as people attempt to explain the success and overrepresentation of African American athletes in certain American sports (Leonard, 1988, pp. 239-240). Most myths attempting to rationalize the dominance of African Americans in specific sports generally have little scientific credibility. For example, there remains the popular belief that African American athletes are physically superior to white athletes, and that their superior body build is genetically determined, giving them an advantage over their white counterparts. Many believe this advantage accounts for the success among African American athletes in specific sports (Coakley, 1990; Leonard, 1988; Sokolove, 1988). Although some physical differences are apparent between African Americans and whites as a whole, it remains to be demonstrated that anatomical and/or physiological differences between African American and white athletes contribute significantly to the dominance of either over the other in sports competition (Coakley, 1990; Davis, 1990; Eitzen & Sage, 1989; Leonard, 1988; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989; Sailes, 1987, 1991; Sokolove, 1988).

Stereotypes about African American inferiority also find adherents in many segments of American culture, including sport. Steele (1990) argues that one race-oriented component of white superiority and black inferiority is intelligence. Support for the physical superiority myth indirectly contributes to the belief that the African American athlete is mentally and intellectually inferior to the white athlete (Davis, 1990; Hoose, 1989; Sailes, 1991). Conceptions about the dumb jock stereotype are therefore related to racial stereotyping. This racist attitude leads to the discriminatory practice of channeling African Americans away from the central positions (i.e., leadership, decision making) in college and professional sport (Coakley, 1990; Eitzen & Sage, 1989; Leonard, 1988; Schneider & Eitzen, 1986). For example, Al Campanis, former Los Angeles Dodgers general manager, exposed racial stereotyping in sport when he made the assertion on national television that African Americans may not have the "necessities" to be managers in professional baseball (Hoose, 1989). Positional segregation (often referred to as *stacking*) is prevalent among college and professional baseball and football teams (Jones, Leonard, Schmitt, Smith, & Tolone, 1987; Schneider & Eitzen, 1986).

Lombardo (1978, p. 60) noted two distinct stereotypes that have emerged regarding African American males. Known as "the Brute" and "the Sambo" stereotypes, they were developed by whites to maintain their superior position in society and to denigrate African American males, keeping them subordinate.

Whereas the Brute stereotype characterized the African American male as primitive, temperamental, overreactive, uncontrollable, violent, and sexually powerful, the more popular Sambo stereotype depicted him as benign, childish, immature, exuberant, uninhibited, lazy, comical, impulsive, fun loving, good humored, inferior, and lovable. Lombardo criticized the Harlem Globetrotters for their continued perpetuation of the Sambo stereotype in sport and for compromising the integrity of African Americans.

Many of the myths regarding African American athletes suffer from scientifically unacceptable assumptions and are not substantiated by research. Moreover, the variables impacting the sport socialization and sport participation patterns of African American athletes in American sport emanate from the social constraints placed upon them by the dominant culture and their determination to overcome them (Coakley, 1990; Eitzen & Sage, 1989; Leonard, 1988; McPherson et al., 1989; Sailes, 1987, 1991; Sokolove, 1988). Although less serious, the dumb jock stereotype can have an effect on white athletes, but it has a compounding effect on African American athletes.

Conceptual Model

Most studies uncovering racial improprieties in sport assume that racist attitudes that lead to acts of discrimination are the primary antecedents. Few, if any, studies attempt to determine the extent to which actual cultural or racial stereotyping endures in American sport. Further, assuming that racist attitudes lead to acts of discrimination in American sport, without scientific evidence of cultural or racial stereotyping, creates gaps in the literature. This study sought to determine the extent of racial and athletic stereotyping, utilizing racial and gender differences as a foundation to investigate the prevalence of white male hegemony among college students.

This investigation sought to determine the presence of and relationship between intellectual stereotyping and racial stereotyping to provide some validation for the assertion that stereotypical and racist attitudes prevail in American sport. Beliefs about intelligence, academic integrity, and academic competitiveness among male college student-athletes as well as assumptions about intelligence, academic preparation, style of play, athletic competitiveness, physical superiority, athletic ability, and mental temperament among African American athletes were investigated. It was hypothesized that intellectual stereotyping and racial stereotyping do exist, that there is a relationship between the two, and that these beliefs vary by race and gender.

Instrument

No studies were available that surveyed racially or intellectually oriented beliefs about college student-athletes. Consequently, it became necessary to develop a questionnaire to complete this investigation. Informal interviews with college students, college student-athletes, and college and high school coaches, as well as precedents in the related literature depicting the relationships between culture, race, and sport, were used as guides in the development of the instrument employed in this study.

The questionnaire was designed to reveal subjects' perceptions or beliefs regarding specific stereotypical beliefs about college student-athletes and African

American athletes. The questionnaire contained 30 items and employed a 5-point Likert scale coded in the same direction ranging as follows: 5 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *agree*, 3 = *undecided*, 2 = *disagree*, 1 = *strongly disagree*. Sample questions included in the instrument were as follows: "Generally, athletes are not as smart as the average student." "Generally, blacks are better athletes than whites." "Black athletes are not as academically prepared to be in college as the average student."

The conceptual model, conceived by collapsing the 30 items in the instrument, produced several dependent variables. For athletes, they were: intelligence, academic integrity, and academic competitiveness. For African American athletes, they were intelligence, academic preparation, athletic skill orientation (style), competitiveness, physical superiority, athletic ability, and mental temperament.

Method

Subjects

The questionnaire was administered to 869 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in lecture hall classes who were randomly selected from the course registration booklet at Indiana University. The respondents were informed some questions might make them uncomfortable but were encouraged to respond to each item as sincerely and objectively as possible.

Subjects participating in the study were identified accordingly: African American students = 45, white students = 786, other = 38, males = 427, and females = 442. The author employed the *t* test to determine differences by race and gender.

Results

When the *agree* and *strongly agree* categories were combined, examination of the data revealed that approximately 45% of the subjects felt that college student-athletes were not as smart as the average college student, almost 44% felt student-athletes took easy courses to stay academically eligible, and 37% felt student-athletes were not as academically competitive as the typical college student (see Table 1). Despite this finding, only 10% of the sample were willing to reveal that they felt college student-athletes were "dumb jocks."

Approximately 12% of the sample felt African American athletes were not as smart as white athletes, whereas approximately 25% felt African American athletes were not academically prepared to attend college. Twenty-two percent of the sample felt that African American athletes demonstrated a playing style different from their white counterparts. Moreover, just over 20% of the sample felt that African American athletes were physically superior to the white athlete, and approximately 33% of the respondents indicated they felt African American athletes were more skilled and were better athletes than their white counterparts. Finally, 12.7% of the sample felt African American athletes were temperamental (see Table 2).

Table 1
Evidence of the Dumb Jock Stereotype

Dependent variable	Agree (N%)	Undecided (N%)	Disagree (N%)
Intelligence	45.5	2.5	51.9
Academic integrity	43.8	31.7	23.8
Academic competitiveness	37.0	24.3	37.6

Table 2
Evidence of Athletic Racial Stereotypes

Dependent variable	Agree (N%)	Undecided (N%)	Disagree (N%)
Intelligence	11.9	25.4	61.8
Academic preparation	25.4	29.1	44.5
Style	22.3	27.7	48.6
Competitiveness	9.3	26.2	63.4
Physical superiority	20.2	22.2	56.6
Athletic ability	33.1	19.0	46.8
Mental temperament	12.7	33.7	52.2

Statistically significant differences were revealed on several variables contained within the conceptual model in the comparisons by gender and race.

Dumb Jock Stereotype

Significant differences were evident on two of the dependent variables: intelligence for race, and academic integrity for both gender and race. Specifically, whites ($M = 2.67$) felt more strongly than blacks ($M = 2.22$) that college student-athletes were not as intelligent as the typical student. Concurrently, males ($M = 3.29$) felt more strongly than females ($M = 3.15$) and whites ($M = 3.24$) felt more strongly than blacks ($M = 2.88$), that college student-athletes took easy courses to remain eligible to compete in varsity athletics (see Table 3).

African American Athlete Stereotypes

Significant differences emerged on the dependent variables intelligence and academic preparation for both gender and race. Specifically, males ($M = 2.44$) and whites ($M = 2.35$) felt more strongly than females ($M = 2.19$) and blacks ($M = 1.80$), respectively, that white athletes were more intelligent than African American athletes. Additionally, on a specific question, males ($M = 2.74$) felt more strongly than females ($M = 2.58$) that white athletes received better

Table 3
Evidence of the Dumb Jock Stereotype by Race and Gender

Dependent variable	Mean		Mean	
	Black (<i>n</i> = 45)	White (<i>n</i> = 786)	Male (<i>n</i> = 427)	Female (<i>n</i> = 442)
Intelligence	2.22	2.67*	2.68	2.61
Academic integrity	2.88	3.24*	3.29	3.15*
Academic competitiveness	2.66	2.98	2.98	2.95

**p* = .05.

grades than African American athletes. Also, males ($M = 3.29$) felt more strongly than females ($M = 3.15$) and whites ($M = 2.72$) felt more strongly than blacks ($M = 2.24$) that African American athletes were not as academically prepared to attend college.

Significant differences were found for the dependent variables competitiveness and temperament for both gender and race, and style for race. Females ($M = 2.45$) and African Americans ($M = 2.93$) felt more strongly than males ($M = 2.15$) and whites ($M = 2.26$), respectively, that African American athletes were athletically more competitive than white athletes. African Americans ($M = 4.11$) felt more strongly than whites ($M = 3.01$) that African American athletes had a different playing style than white athletes. Concurrently, whites ($M = 2.49$) and males ($M = 2.55$) felt more strongly than blacks ($M = 2.02$) or females ($M = 2.39$), that African American athletes were temperamental (see Table 4).

Discussion

This investigation generated substantial evidence disclosing the presence of the dumb jock stereotype in some of the groups examined. Indications of negative perceptions of the intellectual competence and academic integrity among college student-athletes were evident. Whites felt more strongly that the typical college student-athlete was not as smart or as academically competitive as the typical college student, whereas whites and males believed college student-athletes took easy courses to stay eligible to compete in college sports. These attitudes prevail despite the literature to the contrary (Lederman, 1990). This suggests some white and male college students may hold superior attitudes regarding their education and intelligence, may not be well informed about the overall academic success of college student-athletes, or may believe media and cultural depictions of athletes as intellectually inferior. It is interesting to note that attitudes implying the presence of the dumb jock stereotype were prevalent among the subjects, yet most were reluctant to disclose their beliefs in that particular stigma.

Table 4
Evidence of Racial Stereotyping by Race and Gender

Dependent variable	Mean		Mean	
	Black (n = 45)	White (n = 786)	Male (n = 427)	Female (n = 442)
Intelligence	1.80	2.35*	2.44	2.19*
Academic preparation	2.24	2.72*	3.29	3.15*
Style	4.11	3.01*	2.66	2.62
Competitiveness	2.93	2.26*	2.15	2.45*
Physical superiority	2.93	2.77	2.52	2.43
Athletic ability	2.93	2.75	2.78	2.77
Mental temperament	2.02	2.49*	2.55	2.39*

* $p = .05$.

This investigation was able to validate the presence of racial stereotyping regarding African American athletes. The data revealed whites and males held stronger negative stereotypical beliefs than blacks and females about African American athletes. Generally, whites and males felt more strongly that the African American athlete was not as academically prepared to be in college as the average student, received lower grades than white athletes, and was not as intelligent as white athletes. These findings are analogous to the assumption that African American athletes are intellectually inferior to their white counterparts, which is questioned in the literature (Coakley, 1990; Davis, 1990; Hoose, 1989; Leonard, 1988; Sailes, 1987, 1991; Sokolove, 1988).

It is reasonable to assume the white subjects had minimal contact with African American athletes, which might account, to some extent, for the prevalence of their stereotypical attitudes. It is interesting to note that the same groups who believed college student-athletes were not as smart as the typical college student also felt African American athletes were less intelligent than their white counterparts. It appears evident that sport stereotyping carried over to racial stereotyping.

Males felt more strongly than females that African American athletes were temperamental. These findings support the existence of the "brute" stereotype (Lombardo, 1978) in sport, which characterizes the African American athlete as temperamental and overreactive. It is conceivable that current depictions of African American men both in the media and in college and professional sports contribute to the prevalence of the brute stereotype evident in this study.

It is interesting that women and African Americans did not hold as strongly negative views regarding sports stereotyping. Women and African Americans felt African American athletes were more competitive and had a different playing style. The literature supports these contentions offering sociocultural interpretations. Further, obvious interaction among African Americans would contribute to the adoption of fairer and more realistic orientations about athletic participation and the elimination of negative stereotypes, particularly when sport is viewed

much more seriously within the confines of African American culture (Sailes, 1987). The so-called "old boy" network, which is predominantly white and male, perpetuates and maintains the status quo for its own benefit, even to the extent of perpetuating negative stereotypes about other cultural and ethnic groups (Davis, 1990; Hoose, 1989; Steele, 1990). African Americans and women participating in this study appear to be somewhat exempt from that preoccupation.

Conclusions

There appears to be more support for the dumb jock stereotype compared to athletic racial stereotyping. It is possible that the subjects were more reluctant to disclose their true feelings, which might have been recognized as racist responses. There is considerably less guilt associated with holding a dumb jock stereotype, which could explain its greater prevalence in this investigation, although even subjects in this sample were reluctant to state outright that athletes are dumb jocks. Although no specific test was made of the connection between dumb jock and racial stereotypes, it is apparent that, if "jocks" are perceived as "dumb," and if black athletes are perceived to be neither as intelligent nor as academically prepared as white athletes, it would be logical to assume that there exists a compounding effect in the perceptions of the subjects.

This study was not without its limitations. The sample consisted of Indiana University (IU) students, and approximately 64% of IU students are from the state of Indiana. The scope of this study is obviously limited to those dimensions. It is possible the attitudes and perceptions of Indiana University students are not necessarily representative of other groups. However, the findings contained in this study have value in that they substantiate the presence and continued existence of racial and social stereotyping and validate the possibility of their existence elsewhere.

The exposure of racial and social stereotyping is quite possibly an indication of underlying social problems that prevail at IU. Coakley (1990) noted the social isolation and undercurrents of subtle racism experienced by African American athletes at predominantly white schools. Investigations such as this further illustrate the attitudinal problems permeating intercollegiate and professional sports, American colleges, and society as a whole, and the need for continued education and change.

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