

## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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### **Race, sports, and education: Improving opportunities and outcomes for Black male college athletes**

By John N. Singer

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2019. 24 pp., (clothcover)

ISBN-13: 978-1-68253-409-0

### **Reviewed by**

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US college sport is a multibillion-dollar enterprise that influences the growth of sport programs in primary and secondary levels of education. It also feeds the professional sport business (NFL, NBA). In his book, *Race, Sports, and Education: Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Black Male College Athletes*, author John Singer (2019) critically examines the educational plight of the Black male athletes in the football and basketball programs at historically White colleges and universities (HWCU) that sponsor the National College Athletic Association (NCAA).

The book focuses on Black male athletes' struggles with college sport at HWCU as it negatively impacts their educational experiences and outcomes. Singer criticizes structures, policies and practices within the athletic departments of NCAA and HWCU. He finds that the educational outcomes of Black male football and basketball athletes are low because they often spend more time on athletic activities than on their academic studies. The author argues for equitable systems that help nurture the unique gifts and talents of Black male athletes both on and off fields of play.

The book draws from principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine pertinent macro-, meso-, and micro-level aspects of the participation of Black male athletes in college sport. This approach seeks to disrupt this systemic racism and other forms of

oppression that subordinate certain groups and individuals. Through this lens, Singer embraces an anti-deficit approach that emphasizes the strengths of Black male athletes as a marginalised group in higher education. The author notes that ‘colorblind’ policies are disingenuous because they highlight the success of a few Black people, while many others continue to encounter barriers in an elite White male system.

In the first part of the book, Singer discusses his case study of three Black male athletes who participated in a college football program at HWCU that was known for athletic excellence and had been historically dominated by Black male athletes. These individuals shared their experience in 2002 when they were students and again as established professionals in 2018. They shared that education at HWCU gave people of colour an opportunity to understand the larger social contexts in which they lived, and enabled them to more effectively speak to their experiences.

College sport offered financial, psychological and social benefits and transferable skills they needed for success in their careers. However, the three participants struggled to balance their academic and athletic roles. They spent more time each week in sports-related activities than they did on their studies, and revealed that school administrators did not expect much from their academic performance.

Two important themes emerge from this case study: Access Discrimination and Treatment Discrimination. Access Discrimination occurred when Black athletes were blocked from coaching and management positions in college sport. They had to be extraordinary athletes to be considered for these positions. Treatment Discrimination occurred when Black athletes were denied privileges and opportunities that were granted to their White male peers, as the result of negative racial stereotyping.

The author further discusses the institutional integrity of the NCAA and HWCU athletic departments that promised to create positive conditions for the education of the college athletes. In this regard, the participants believed that NCAA policies on athlete compensation and the resulting disparities of income between Black and White male athletes, were unjust and needed to be changed. They believed that this system is corrupt as it only benefits elite White male, and emphasized the need for more Black people in leadership positions.

In the second part of the book, Singer presents narrative vignettes of nine former Black male athletes’ college sport experiences. They shared their perspectives on the nexus of their educational outcomes and sport participation at Division I HWCU. The par-

ticipants contended that college sport helped them to solve problems and make decisions in their real life; it also gave them access to life opportunities for upward social mobility. They were aware that college sport is controlled by an academic capitalist model that undermined their education. One participant asserted that HWCU coaches used their power to force athletes into their market-driven agenda, which suppressed the curiosity of Black male athletes. To enhance the educational outcomes of Black male athletes at HWCU, the nine participants recommended that educational leaders should take a strengths-based approach when working with Black male athletes and should adopt culturally relevant pedagogies to provide programs that better serve the interests of Black male athletes. At the same time, the participants suggested that Black male athletes should be responsible for their educational experiences, take classes that challenge them for success in life, and build social networks on the broader campus. Their stories revealed that Black male athletes at HWCU were treated as labourers who produced spectacles on the fields and courts of play. These narratives highlight the power and influence that coaches have over athletes' recruitment and scholarships, and that most of the key decision makers continue to be White males who formulate and enact unfair systems.

I found this critical study of race in sport and education empowering in the sense it gives voice to Black male athletes to reflect upon their educational experience and outcomes. Their stories uncover the dark side of an exploitive college sports system, a critical understanding for parents, practitioners and scholars. I advocate for the CRT perspective that motivates Black male athletes to engage in self-reflection to fight internalized racism and race-sport stereotypes. In addition, they need to ensure they receive a balanced educational experience and consider education an activist pursuit. More scholarly inquiry needs to be done to advance equitable discourses in sport college that disrupt unjust systems and humanise opportunities for Black male athletes.