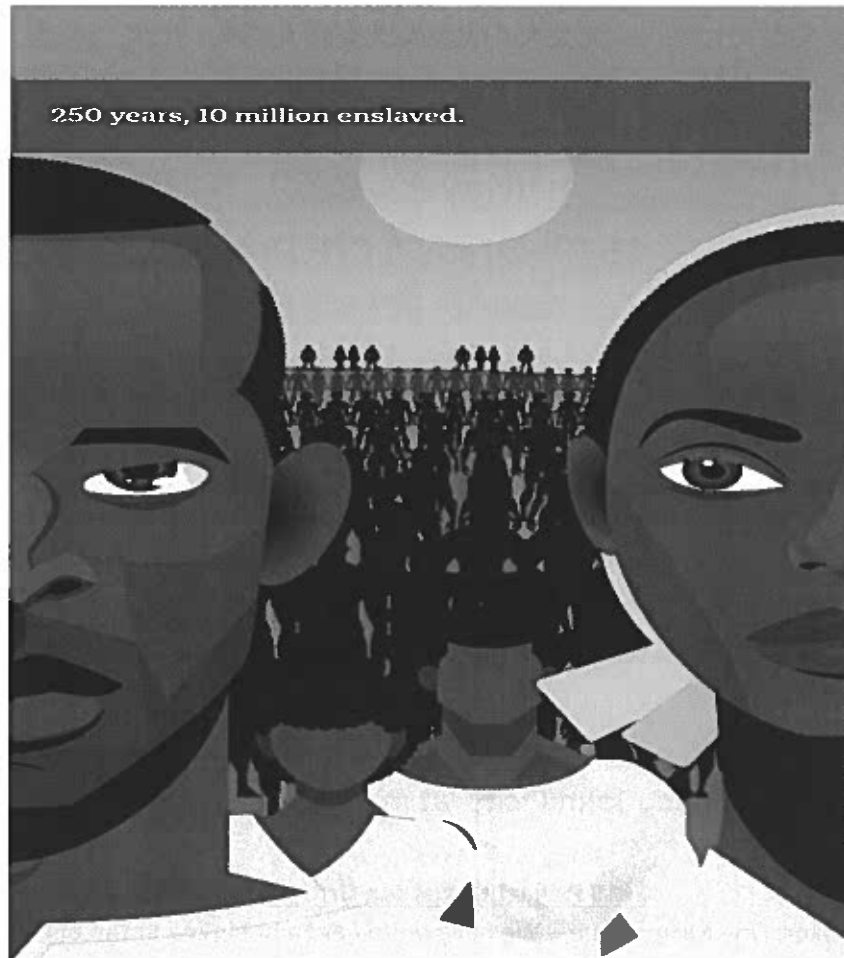


# 1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



**Topic: Stealing Black Culture: Sports**

**Thursday March 11, 2021**

**6:30 – 8:00 pm**

**Zoom ID: 823 648 5349**

**Password: 691353**

## Upcoming 1619 programs

April 8, 2021

### Slavery and Health Care

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

May 13, 2021

### 1619 versus 1776 Projects

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

Please check our 1619 Discussion homepage at:  
<https://heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project/>

And our Facebook Group:  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3125417084169554>


For more information  
Contact: John Piche' at [jpiche@heightslibrary.org](mailto:jpiche@heightslibrary.org)

#### **1619 Project Discussion Group Zoom Rules**

1. One Speaker, One Microphone – We have muted everyone's line at the beginning of the meeting. Please use the "Raise Hand" button in the "Participants" tab. When it is your turn to speak you will be prompted to unmute yourself. Enabling your camera is optional (but recommended). When you comment, please let everyone know your name. Once you've made your point, you will be muted to give others a chance to speak.
2. Keep it Relevant/Consider the Content - Speak from your own experience. Use "I" statements. This is a discussion, not a lecture. No one person knows everything. Your opinion is worthwhile. Out of respect for the conversation, do not insult or put down other attendees. Sexist, racist, and other exclusionary comments will not be tolerated.
3. Disruptive behavior of any kind is not permitted. Disruptive customers will be logged out of the meeting. Library staff have the authority to determine what is disruptive.
4. We ask that participants not record or photograph speakers or fellow participants without permission of all those in attendance. However, please be aware that we cannot stop nonconsensual recording of this meeting.

# Is Slavery's Legacy in the Power Dynamics of Sports?

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 [nytimes.com/2019/08/16/sports/basketball/slavery-anniversary-basketball-owners.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/16/sports/basketball/slavery-anniversary-basketball-owners.html)

By Kurt Streeter

August 16,  
2019

There is no other business like the N.B.A. Its rainbow jump shots, rim-rattling dunks and heart-pounding drama are gleaming monuments to black America. Nearly 80 percent of league players are black. They are multimillionaire superstars, international icons and global purveyors of African-American excellence and culture.

Yet, for all of their success, most of them cannot look at N.B.A. leadership and see their own reflections. The vast majority of head coaches are white, as are most general managers and other league executives. Of the men and women with controlling interests in N.B.A. teams, only one, Michael Jordan of the Charlotte Hornets, looks like most of the players on his team.

This stark divide, and the familiar questions it raises about white people overseeing the toil of African-Americans, adds a layer of tension that ripples just beneath the glamour of the N.B.A. Much of what transpires in the league can be seen through the lens of race, especially this summer, when players upended the usual power dynamics by forcing a flurry of trades and transformational free-agent signings.

Consider the debate sparked by Draymond Green, the Golden State Warriors' voluble All-Star forward, when he cast a wary eye on the league, its power structure and its racial tensions.

In a string of public comments last fall that included an appearance on LeBron James's HBO talk show, Green questioned how the white men and women who control all but one of the N.B.A.'s 30 teams are described.

"The word 'owner,'" Green said, "it dates back to slavery."

It has been 400 years since chattel slavery began in what is now the United States. But Green suggested that the lexicon of 1619 — with African slaves and white owners, with people as currency — should be reworked when it comes to a business with the N.B.A.'s racial dynamic.

His remedy? "Maybe use the word 'chairman' instead."

The league was already steering away from "owner," though no official edict has been issued and Commissioner Adam Silver has said he's fine with the word when it's used in careful context. At N.B.A. headquarters, officials use "governor" as often as possible.

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Nonetheless, Silver told The New York Times in a recent interview that Green's commentary was important.

"Draymond achieved the desired effect," Silver said, explaining that the three-time N.B.A. All-Star had provoked increased sensitivity about the relationship between players and what Silver called "team owners."

Consider, too, the dizzying events of this June and July: Anthony Davis forced his way to the Los Angeles Lakers by demanding a trade away from the New Orleans Pelicans; a bevy of the league's best players — Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving, Kawhi Leonard and others — opted to leave their teams, pair with superstar friends and play in new cities. Last summer, James left the Cleveland Cavaliers to join the Lakers.

The N.B.A. has never seen anything like it.

On one level, it's about money.

But the storm of movement can also be seen as something more profound. Each elite player who bolted to a new team is black. Each had endured years with little control over his destiny. Each played for a team he was forced to join after the N.B.A. draft. Each, for long stretches, had been treated as a business asset, a cog in a machine who could be dumped or traded on a whim.

What we're seeing now is about value beyond money. It's about power, history and the long quest for black self-determination, said David J. Leonard, a professor at Washington State University who has written about race, culture and sports. According to Leonard, a line can be traced to the modern N.B.A. from antebellum slavery.

"One way to think about slavery is as a history of confinement and the struggle of movement — being moved against your will or seeking to break free of those chains," he said. "A connection can be made to what we're seeing in the league today, to the drive among black players to freely move and control one's future, control one's life and likeness, story and voice. All of this is part of a larger history in black America."

This struggle, of course, is not new. In the 1960s, Bill Russell, the Hall of Fame center for the Boston Celtics, was outspoken about race and social justice.

Nor is the struggle confined to basketball. In 1969, Curt Flood led a charge for free agency in baseball, where teams had been able to control the fate of a player for an entire career. Flood's critics, echoing today's "shut up and play" chorus targeting outspoken black athletes, said ballplayers were wealthy and should not complain about limits to their autonomy.

He replied: "A well-paid slave is nonetheless a slave."

But in the modern N.B.A., one particular event ushered in a fresh drive for player power.

In 2014, the league was finally forced to deal with Donald Sterling, a real estate mogul who owned the Los Angeles Clippers despite allegations he practiced racial discrimination in renting apartments. The tipping point came when an audio recording surfaced of Sterling telling a girlfriend that it bothered him when she associated with African-Americans. He asked her not to bring them to games.

His statements drew immediate wrath from players, who banded together and pressed for Sterling to be ousted. James, then playing for the Miami Heat, made their stance clear: "There's no room for Donald Sterling in the N.B.A.," he said. Within days, Silver banned Sterling from the league.

To David West, who retired last year after a 15-year career in which he was an All-Star known for astute views on black empowerment, Sterling's comments pushed the league's players to realize their power as never before.

"Sterling is a part of the story that gets lost," he said. "Being able to hear those words from someone in his position, the intent behind them, it definitely rang a bell for us. It was such a powerful moment."

"We came together as never before and let our discontent be known," he added. "And doing all of that helped change the league dynamic."

The N.B.A., post-Sterling, is a different place.

Gone are the days when Jordan or Magic Johnson or Kobe Bryant toed the corporate line during the peak of their careers. Today's stars feel emboldened to speak openly about race, to advocate social justice, to publicly debate issues like slavery and its enduring effects.

They're led by James and encouraged by Silver, who has boasted of seeing players as partners. Tension around race is not something to run from, Silver said in his interview, as long as it is discussed openly and honestly. Debate done right, he said, can be "an antidote to the fear and isolation that have become so prevalent in our society."

Still, player clout has limits, Mark Anthony Neal, chair of the Department of African and African American Studies at Duke University, cautioned. He cited Warriors Coach Steve Kerr's recent criticism of players who tried to force trades while under contract. Neal also cited when Phil Jackson, the Hall of Fame coach, referred to James's African-American friends and business partners as a "posse" in 2016.

"Phil Jackson is one of the figures in the league that we see as relatively woke," Neal said. What does that say, he added, about team owners who have racial views that are considered less enlightened?

"At some point," he said, "those folks are going to mobilize to push back."

Four hundred years on, the sin of slavery continues to haunt. Its repercussions infect politics, art, education, every community, every last corner of American life. The N.B.A. — indeed, all of sports — is not immune.

# LeBron James: NFL owners are 'old white men' with 'slave mentality' toward players

[washingtonpost.com/sports/2018/12/22/lebron-james-nfl-owners-are-old-white-men-with-slave-mentality-toward-players/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2018/12/22/lebron-james-nfl-owners-are-old-white-men-with-slave-mentality-toward-players/)

By Ben Golliver

December 22, 2018

For LeBron James, the fundamental difference between the NBA and the NFL is the level of respect shown to players by the respective leagues and their team owners. The Lakers forward, who in recent years has become an increasingly outspoken advocate for professional athletes on matters of race and politics, took the NFL and its owners to task on the latest episode of "The Shop," which aired Friday on HBO.

"In the NFL they got a bunch of old white men owning teams and they got that slave mentality," James said. "And it's like, 'This is my team. You do what the f--- I tell y'all to do. Or we get rid of y'all.'"

James, a four-time NBA MVP, made the comments in an extended conversation with his business partner Maverick Carter, Los Angeles Rams running back Todd Gurley, and the actor/rapper Ice Cube.

"I'm so appreciative in our league of our commissioner [Adam Silver]," James continued. "He doesn't mind us having ... a real feeling and to be able to express that. It doesn't even matter if Adam agrees with what we are saying, he at least wants to hear us out. As long as we are doing it in a very educational, non-violent way, then he's absolutely okay with it."

The NBA and the NFL have had strikingly different approaches to player activism. In the NBA, James and others have worn T-shirts during warm-ups in recognition of victims of police violence with no repercussions from the league.

By contrast, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick set off years of controversy and debate when he knelt during the national anthem as a means to protest racial injustice. The NFL and Commissioner Roger Goodell responded by instituting strict guidelines for player conduct during the anthem. Kaepernick, who has not appeared in an NFL game since the 2016 season, ultimately filed a grievance against the league's owners, alleging they colluded to keep him sidelined as a response to his protest.

The NFL and its owners have faced "slave" comparisons numerous times over the past decade. In 2011, then-Minnesota Vikings running back Adrian Peterson said that the league's labor situation was like "modern-day slavery."

During a 2017 owners meeting in the wake of Kaepernick's protest, then-Houston Texans owner Bob McNair reportedly told his fellow owners that, "We can't have the inmates running the prison." Former Texans wide receiver Cecil Shorts replied: "Inmates, slaves and

products. That's all we are to the owners and others."

Over the summer, San Francisco defensive back Richard Sherman accused Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones of possessing "the old plantation mentality" for requiring his players to stand at attention during the national anthem.

As Friday's conversation on "The Shop" continued, James noted the central role that NBA and NFL players have held in growing their respective sports and suggested that NFL owners prioritize short-term results over the long-term success of individual players.

"The players are who make the ship go," he said. "We make it go. Every Sunday, without Todd Gurley and without Odell Beckham Jr., without those players, those guys, there is no football. And it's the same in the NBA. ... The difference between the NBA and the NFL: the NBA [cares about] what we believe [a player] can be, the potential. In the NFL, it's what can you do for me this Sunday or this Monday or this Thursday. And if you ain't it, we moving on."

James stressed that he and other NBA players have still encountered resistance, even though they've been careful to take a non-violent approach to their activism.

"I am very educated about what I believe in and I'm not doing it in a violent way," James said. "I'm not knocking on your door saying, 'Listen, I'm kneeling today and if you don't kneel with me, I'll knock you the f-- out.' But you know people go crazy when things are done outside the box. People don't know how to react."



# Escape From 2020: A Case To Separate Sports And Politics For More Fans And Higher Ratings

**F** [forbes.com/sites/kirkwakefield/2020/08/28/escape-from-2020--a-case-to-separate-sports-and-politics-for-more-fans-and-higher-ratings/](https://forbes.com/sites/kirkwakefield/2020/08/28/escape-from-2020--a-case-to-separate-sports-and-politics-for-more-fans-and-higher-ratings/)

August 28, 2020

Aug 28, 2020, 12:50pm EDT |

**Kirk Wakefield** Contributor ⓘ

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

SportsMoney

I study why fans and teams do what they do.

Anticipation of high broadcast ratings as sports returned was met with opening day success followed by dismal returns. With an election year upon us and an overload of dreary news, we wondered if fans tuning in are turned off when they can't escape from politics, protests, and pandemic news.

In collaboration with BASC Partners we conducted a national online poll (N = 956) of validated sports fans representative of Democrats (40%), Republicans (39%) and independents (21%), including nearly 16% Black or African-American respondents. Responses were collected August 18-20, 2020 as the NBA and NHL playoffs are underway and MLB, MLS and NASCAR continue their regular seasons.

## Where did all of the fans go?

Some report the rating declines since sports have returned are simply a continuance of cord-cutting and changing viewing habits exacerbated by the pandemic. Some suggest total consumption may be up even when ratings are not because we've never had so many options, albeit at odd times of day. Still others note the coincidence with kneeling and social justice movements featured in broadcasts may play a role. If fans tune in to sports to escape from the pandemic and politics only to find more protests, some may take a pass.

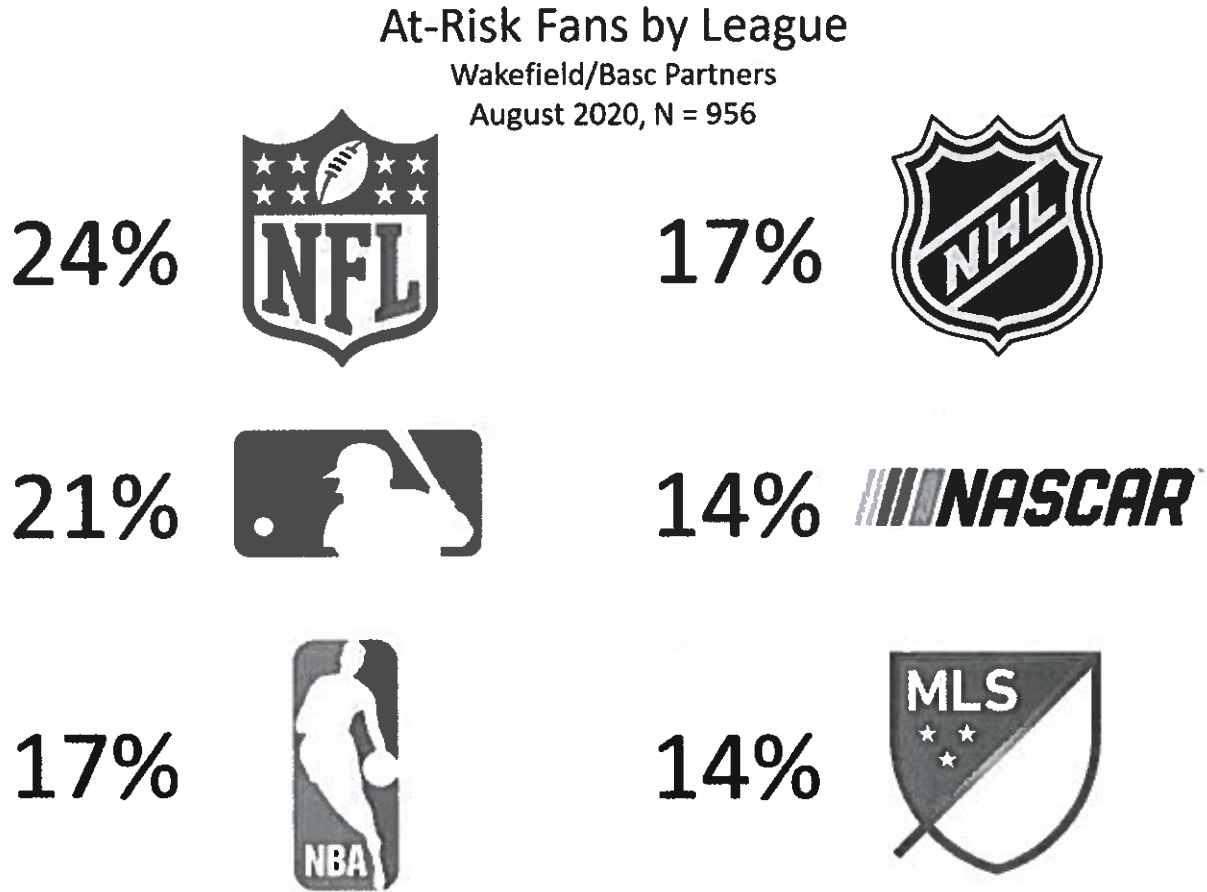
## Who are the at-risk fans?

Fans at-risk watched occasionally, often or frequently in the past but watch less frequently now. New fans are hard to find and losing loyal fans can spell trouble for looming media and collective bargaining agreement deals. From our poll, the NFL leads the way with the most at-risk fans (24%), followed by MLB (21%), NBA (17%), NHL (17%), NASCAR (14%) and MLS (14%).

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## Crisis Management: Justin Thomas And His Endorsement Portfolio After Being Dropped By Ralph Lauren

If fans watch sports to escape the news deluge of political and social unrest, are the leagues at risk of piling-on?



2020 At-risk fans by league  
Wakefield/Basc Partners

### **Why do fans tune in?**

Watching professional sports is an escape. In the highly partisan political landscape that is America today, this may be the only commonality across all parties as 73% of Republicans, 62% of Democrats and 71% of independents all agree that they watch sports to escape from everything else.

As political and health issues seem to bleed into every facet of life, how welcome are these topics in sports?

- **Political opinions:** Only about one in four (27%) of all fans agree with “when I tune into sports I want to hear about political opinions.” Over half (50.2%) disagree with that statement. That number increases to 58.6% for at-risk NFL fans who don’t want to hear about politics while watching.
- **Social issues:** Overall, only 37% want to hear about social issues when tuning into sports, while 39% do not. Interest in social issues on sports broadcasts drops to 31% for At-Risk-Fans in the NBA and MLB.
- **Pandemic updates:** Just over one in three (37%) of all fans agree they want to hear more about the pandemic. Even more (43%) expressly do not want to hear about the pandemic while watching sports. The numbers jump for at-risk fans of the NFL (47%), MLB (48%), and NBA (55%).

Only 18% see “today’s political and social issues as two different things.” The remainder believe it’s the same thing (26%) or something in-between (56%).

Sports is an escape. Appealing to at most one-third of the fans with politics, social issues or pandemic updates sacrifices the two-thirds with no interest. Fans don’t watch sports to keep up with current issues of the world. They tune into sports to watch: sports.

## Should athletes, broadcasters and sponsors promote politics?

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Two out of three respondents answered “no” when asked, “Do you care about the politics of any individual athlete?” The vast majority (79%) of at-risk-fans of the NBA report no interest in the politics of an individual athlete.

Just 8% of all fans agree that “broadcasters should use sports to promote political issues.” Fewer still (6%) believe “sponsors should use sports to promote political issues.” Overall, 60% of fans do not agree that “pro athletes should use their platforms to promote political issues.” This share jumps among the at-risk-fans of the NFL (70%) and MLB (72%).

Leagues, teams, players, networks and broadcasters that continue to weave in politics risk losing fans who may never come back. Take the NBA, in the midst of a decade-long 45% slide in viewership. Among its at-risk-fans, 60% are unsatisfied with “the balance of social & political issues presented within the broadcasts since the return of live sports.” Among those who’ve watched at least one NBA game and aren’t going to watch anymore, only 12.5% are satisfied with the current social/political/sports mix. Among the at-risk NBA fans, 12% of Blacks or African-Americans are at-risk, compared to 18% for all other races. Others have outlined the myriad of reasons for the decline in NBA viewership. The current blend of sports, politics and social issues surrounding the NBA is unlikely to help ratings in the near and long term.

## What about the NFL?

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Given the historic kneeling issue, the NFL may have the most on the line with nearly a quarter of at-risk-fans (24%). No differences exist across racial lines. Half of the at-risk fans (12%) are avid watchers planning to watch less this season, along with 9% who often watched in the past but plan to watch little or not at all now.

Among those planning not to watch any games this year, only 18% care about the politics of any individual athlete, with no significant differences based on race.

Few non-watchers (6%) or occasional 2020 NFL watchers (24%) believe athletes should use their platforms to promote political positions. Exactly zero of 2020 non-watchers want to hear about political opinions when they watch sports. The same is true for all non-watchers regardless of race. Few non-watchers want to hear about social issues (12%) when tuning into sports.

A total of 18% of all fans reported they would watch the NFL less if “the NFL offers the same balance of social & political issues within their broadcasts as the NBA.”

## What to do?

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Fans enjoy the thrill of the game, the agony of defeat and the escapism watching their favorite team can provide. The thrill may be gone for as many as one-quarter of fans if leagues continue to weave politics, pandemic and social justice news into sports broadcasts.

Some may suggest the integration of non-sports topics is to appease the new generation of fan. But no league can afford to give up on any generation, given the relative market size of Boomers (72 million), Gen X (65 million), Gen Y (72 million) and Gen Z (68 million).

The NFL might think it best to target the coveted 18-49 demo, thinking younger fans watch for different reasons. That would be wrong. Among fans in this demo whose favorite sport is the NFL, 71% do not care about the politics of any individual athlete, edging out the 50+ set (69%). Fans whose favorite sport is the NHL (80%), NASCAR (76%) and MLB (74%) are uniformly disinterested in the politics of athletes. Even among those whose first love is the NBA, the large majority (59%) of the 18-49 demo has no interest in player politics.

What to do? Given the clear opinions that sports broadcasters and sponsors shouldn't be in the business of promoting politics during sportscasts, then don't add fuel to the fire. Equally obvious is the fact that all Americans, players included, have a right to share their voices. Some players believe it is their social duty given their public profile and reach. At least some viewers have interest in these opinions. Broadcasters can leverage this opportunity to produce high quality shows dedicated to politics, social issues, and their interplay with sports. This could be a welcome outlet for some and provide an opportunity for open dialogue to truly help us understand how to work together. So long as we can maintain the separation of sport and state (of politics).

Kirk Wakefield

# It's Time for Black Athletes to Leave White Colleges

[theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/10/black-athletes-should-leave-white-colleges/596629/](https://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/10/black-athletes-should-leave-white-colleges/596629/)

September 5, 2019

In the summer of 2018 Kayvon Thibodeaux, who was then ranked as the top high-school football player in America, visited Florida A&M University, in Tallahassee. When a player of Thibodeaux's caliber visits a perennial football power—say, Alabama—it's called Wednesday. But when he visits a historically black college or university (HBCU) like Florida A&M, it threatens to crack the foundation on which the moneymaking edifice of college sports rests.

"I really just wanted to learn the history of FAMU," Thibodeaux, a defensive end who received a scholarship offer from the school after his freshman year in high school, told me. "And I wanted to show there were more opportunities out there than just big-time Division I schools."

Ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, Thibodeaux announced that he was going to one of the top football programs in the country, the University of Oregon. "Nobody wants to eat McDonald's when you can get filet mignon" is how Thibodeaux put it. But over the course of the five months between his visit to FAMU and his decision to enroll at Oregon, Thibodeaux—who gushed about the historically black university on social media—galvanized alumni and boosted national awareness of the institution. It was a moment of hope for HBCUs, and it should have been a moment of fear for the predominantly white institutions whose collective multibillion-dollar revenues have been built largely on the exertions of (uncompensated) black athletes.

The NCAA reported \$1.1 billion in revenue for its 2017 fiscal year. Most of that money comes from the Division I men's-basketball tournament. In 2016, the NCAA extended its television agreement with CBS Sports and Turner Broadcasting through 2032—an \$8.8 billion deal. About 30 Division I schools each bring in at least \$100 million in athletic revenue every year. Almost all of these schools are majority white—in fact, black men make up only 2.4 percent of the total undergraduate population of the 65 schools in the so-called Power Five athletic conferences. Yet black men make up 55 percent of the football players in those conferences, and 56 percent of basketball players.

Black athletes have attracted money and attention to the predominantly white universities that showcase them. Meanwhile, black colleges are struggling. Alabama's athletic department generated \$174 million in the 2016–17 school year, whereas the HBCU that generated the most money from athletics that year, Prairie View A&M, brought in less than \$18 million. Beyond sports, the average HBCU endowment is only one-eighth that of the average predominantly white school; taken together, all of the HBCU endowments combined make up less than a tenth of Harvard's.

Why should this matter to anyone beyond the administrators and alumni of the HBCUs themselves? Because black colleges play an important role in the creation and propagation of a black professional class. Despite constituting only 3 percent of four-year colleges in the country, HBCUs have produced 80 percent of the black judges, 50 percent of the black lawyers, 50 percent of the black doctors, 40 percent of the black engineers, 40 percent of the black members of Congress, and 13 percent of the black CEOs in America today. (They have also produced this election cycle's only black female candidate for the U.S. presidency: Kamala Harris is a 1986 graduate of Howard University.)

In a country where the racial wealth gap remains enormous—the median white household has nearly 10 times the wealth of the median black household, and the rate of white homeownership is about 70 percent higher than that of black homeownership—institutions that nurture a black middle class are crucial. And when these institutions are healthy, they bring economic development to the black neighborhoods that surround them.

Moreover, some black students feel safer, both physically and emotionally, on an HBCU campus—all the more so as racial tensions have risen in recent years. Navigating a predominantly white campus as a black student can feel isolating, even for athletes. Davon Dillard is a basketball player who transferred to Shaw University after Oklahoma State dismissed him for disciplinary reasons. “Going to a school where most of the people are the same color as you, it’s almost like you can let your guard down a little bit,” he told me. “You don’t have to pretend to be somebody else. You don’t have to dress this way, or do things this way. It’s like, ‘I know you. We have the same kind of struggles. We can relate.’ It’s almost like you’re back at home in your neighborhood.” Perhaps partly for this reason, black students’ graduation rates at HBCUs are notably higher than black students’ at other colleges when controlling for factors such as income and high-school success.

Top black athletes used to go to black colleges. In fact, until the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in 1954, Jim Crow and segregation made black colleges pretty much the only destination for black athletes. Even into the 1970s and ’80s, some HBCU alums were achieving Hall of Fame–level greatness in basketball (Willis Reed, Grambling State ’64; Earl “The Pearl” Monroe, Winston-Salem State ’67) and football (Walter Payton, Jackson State ’75; Jerry Rice, Mississippi Valley State ’84). But the reason black athletes today don’t choose FAMU over Oregon, or Hampton over Duke, is obvious: Their chances of making it to the pros as a high draft pick, and of winning lucrative endorsement deals, are enhanced by going to the predominantly white schools that sit atop the college-sports world. Even for the majority of players, whose prospects of a professional sports career are remote, the lure of playing in championships—in giant stadiums with luxurious training facilities, in front of millions of television viewers—is strong. Clemson is only 6 percent black, but it’s won two of the past three national football championships and has a \$55 million football complex. North Carolina A&T, a few hours north, is 78 percent black. And while the Aggies have won the HBCU national championship in three of the past four seasons, the program can’t offer what Clemson can in terms of resources and exposure; A&T’s entire endowment is worth barely as

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much as Clemson's football complex. Presented with a choice between Clemson and North Carolina A&T, most high-school athletes would choose Clemson—whose starting lineup, not incidentally, is majority black.

But what if a group of elite athletes *collectively* made the choice to attend HBCUs?

Black athletes overall have never had as much power and influence as they do now. While NCAA rules prevent them from making money off their own labor at the college level, they are essential to the massive amount of revenue generated by college football and basketball. This gives them leverage, if only they could be moved to use it.

“I have a hard time saying this,” LeVelle Moton, the head basketball coach at North Carolina Central, an HBCU that has won three consecutive Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference titles, told me. “Black people, I love us, but everyone else understands that we’re the culture, except for us.” Audiences and money “are going to come wherever the product is. We don’t understand that, and we continue to give ourselves away for free.”

Some people point to September 12, 1970, as the day HBCUs lost their corner on the nation’s best black football talent. That’s the day an all-white Alabama team got their asses handed to them by the University of Southern California’s heralded African American triumvirate of quarterback Jimmy Jones and running backs Sam “Bam” Cunningham and Clarence Davis. After that, football programs in the Deep South realized that if they were going to stay competitive, they would have to recruit black players. (In other areas of the country, colleges had already begun to recruit African Americans: The Michigan State team that fought Notre Dame to a 10–10 draw in the fall of 1966—a contest that many still consider to be the best college football game of all time—had 20 black players.)

In the era before big television contracts, HBCUs more or less had a monopoly on black athletes, because there was little money to be made from them. But when college sports became big business, the major sports schools proved to be relentless in recruiting players away from HBCUs. William C. Rhoden, the author of *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, an account of how black athletes have historically commanded big audiences but had little true power, places some of the blame for the exodus on the HBCUs themselves, which operated as if they would have a monopoly on black talent forever. “The HBCUs probably felt that racism was so deeply entrenched that white people would never go after black kids en masse,” Rhoden told me recently. “Had HBCUs known then what we all know now, maybe they could have figured out a way to say, ‘How can we, with the window we’ve got left, make a great product, so when white people finally get religion, we’ll still be in a good position?’”

The flight of black athletes to majority-white colleges has been devastating to HBCUs. Consider Grambling State, in Louisiana, home of arguably the most storied football program in HBCU history. A 57 percent decrease in state funding over a period of several years had made it difficult for Grambling to maintain its football facilities. In 2013, things got so bad that players—fed up with the school’s dilapidated facilities and the long bus trips to road



games, as well as the firing of the coach—staged a boycott that led to them forfeiting a game. Though the walkout prompted Grambling to spend \$30,000 on a new weight room, and it has since raised nearly \$2 million for upgrades to its Eddie Robinson Stadium, the ordeal was embarrassing for the university.

Today, most blue-chip recruits in football or basketball don't even consider attending black colleges. This has forced HBCUs to become proficient at identifying and developing diamonds in the rough—prospects who were passed over or jettisoned by bigger programs. “These are guys who were thought to be not big enough or not fast enough,” Buddy Pough, the head football coach at South Carolina State, told me. “Our niche has been that we take the guy that nobody seems to want.”

To attract the best football and basketball players in the nation, HBCUs have to spend money to improve their facilities—but to generate the athletic revenue necessary to improve their facilities, the colleges need more of the best players.

“We really have to get monetary support in upgrading facilities,” LeVelle Moton told me. “These kids want to know: What does this weight room look like? What does this athletic facility look like? What does this practice facility look like? It's tough to compete.”

Kayvon Thibodeaux said much the same. “In this day and age, it's about money,” he told me. “Unless HBCUs upgrade drastically, I don't know if things will change.”

But what if young black athletes were to force that change?

“NCAA athletics generate billions in profit annually, and Black athletes are the prized workforce,” reads the mission statement of an organization called the Power Moves Initiative. “However, African Americans are not stakeholders at predominantly white universities and corporations that profit from our talent. The system must be disrupted to redirect the stream of wealth.”

Robert Buck, who attended two black colleges (Alabama State and FAMU), got the idea to start the Power Moves Initiative after organizing the 5th Quarter Classic, a now-defunct annual game between HBCUs held in Mobile, Alabama. He saw how the black colleges featured in the classic were generating millions for Mobile, a city that is 50.4 percent black. It bothered Buck that other black athletes were generating such money for predominantly white schools, and that other black communities weren't receiving the same benefits.

“It's almost like we were being used,” Buck told me.

He is convinced that steering high-school athletes of color toward HBCUs can help invigorate African American communities and generate black success. “I think we have an inferiority complex,” he said. “We, as black people, don't feel like something is as large or as good if a white person isn't in charge of it ... We're the value. That value doesn't diminish because you're doing it with your own.”



There's a model for how young black athletes could leverage their talent and financial power. In the early 1990s, five high-school basketball players—two each from Texas and Detroit, and one from Chicago—got to know one another playing in all-star games and basketball camps. They enrolled together at the University of Michigan, and partway through their first season they were all starting for the team. Becoming famous as the Fab Five, they reached the championship game of the March Madness tournament in 1992 and 1993, and four of them went on to play in the NBA. What if instead of enrolling at Michigan they'd gone to Howard, taking the Bison, rather than the Wolverines, to the Final Four?

A single high-profile recruit enrolling at an HBCU would get people's attention. (Thibodeaux got people's attention just by *considering* enrolling.) Three or four of them could spark a national conversation—and, in basketball, could generate a championship run that attracted fans and money. Now imagine five or 10 or 20—or a few dozen. That could quickly propel a few black schools into the athletic empyrean, and change the place of HBCUs in American culture.

It wouldn't be that hard. Many of the top high-school players, especially in basketball, know one another from Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) tournaments and all-star games, as the Fab Five did. If a few of them got together at HBCUs, they could redraw the landscape of college basketball.

"If we created a Fab Five at Alabama State," Buck told me, "that would create a lot of hype around our HBCUs, showing the value that we already possess and redirecting a whole lot of dollars to black colleges."

Bringing elite athletic talent back to black colleges would have potent downstream effects. It would boost HBCU revenues and endowments; stimulate the economy of the black communities in which many of these schools are embedded; amplify the power of black coaches, who are often excluded from prominent positions at predominantly white institutions; and bring the benefits of black labor back to black people. In the general culture, prominent figures such as Beyoncé, LeBron James, and the recently slain rapper Nipsey Hussle have argued that African Americans should be using their talents not just to enrich themselves but to help strengthen and empower black communities. "Gentrify your own hood before these people do it," Jay-Z rapped at the concert that reopened Webster Hall in New York City in April. "Claim eminent domain and have your people move in."

If promising black student athletes chose to attend HBCUs in greater numbers, they would, at a minimum, bring some welcome attention and money to beleaguered black colleges, which invested in black people when there was no athletic profit to reap. More revolutionarily, perhaps they could disrupt the reign of an "amateur" sports system that uses the labor of black folks to make white folks rich.

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