

The Impact of Transitions into Careers on the Financial Prosperity of Collegiate Black Athletes

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Why in society do black athletes seem to fall through the cracks when they finish with their sport, explicitly losing motivation and hope for their future, failing to use connections they have created to be financially stable, and, more importantly, mentally stable? Do black athletes struggle with the transition from sports into careers because of themselves, their support/ loved ones, or are the organizations they played for to blame? Athletes struggle to transition for countless reasons; every athlete's story is subjective. Still, through trends and similarities, broad truths have been found to answer why athletes struggle with career transitions. It is essential to focus on black athletes and identify this group as the primary victims of this long-standing issue. It is necessary to examine and provide aid and awareness for former black athletes and, more importantly, the new generation of athletes who may struggle even more with transitions. Black collegiate athletes transition into careers, and the nature of transitions has a dominant influence on financial prosperity. Examining athletes with various transitions, examine how all the transition characteristics reveal an emerging trend for these athletes.

Historical Background

Black athletes have been the majority in high-major collegiate sports for 35-40 years (Harper). High-major sports are the athletic conferences perceived as “the most prestigious and competitive”(NCAA). Conferences include the Big 12, SEC, Big 10, and Big East. Sports like basketball and football have the highest viewership, sponsorship, and financial support. African American athletes make high-major sports extremely competitive and attractive to fans' eyes. Therefore, scouts highly seek high-level athletes. Being the backbone proves, more often than not, the athlete is a black male, and they are extremely important to the makeup fans, scouts, and everyone involved, who have become familiar with them. Still, black students are

underrepresented in undergraduate rates; in 2025, 67% of Black men in Division I and II sports are graduating (NCAA). Black male athletes have been the long-term victims of being the center of attention in big-time sports. Still, black males and black athletes are not the center of the classroom. “Just over 55 percent of black male student-athletes graduated within six years, compared with 60 percent of all black undergraduate men, 69.3 percent of all student-athletes, and 76.3 percent of all undergraduate students” (Harper). The average numbers don't always do justice, especially when comparing undergraduate rates to black representation on sports teams at major universities. For example, Black men comprised 2.2% of undergraduates at the University of Florida but 77.7% of football and men's basketball teams (Harper).

In years before, Black male student-athletes also graduated at lower rates than their counterparts, black male students. Not only was this an issue, but as a group, male African American athletes graduated less often than athletes of other races. In 2002, only 35% of black athletes graduated (NCAA). Although the number of successes for this community is getting better each year, it's nowhere near what it needs to be: 91% of the athletic community is graduating (NCAA). The depth is more profound than issues directly stemming from the numbers and graduation rates. There is a reason why black collegiate athletes struggle with letting go of their college lives, feel depression and anxiety when transitioning, and therefore struggle with transitions into careers: it's the socialization while they're in college and even before that. Using statistics and professional experiential observations, theories discuss the human and sociological factors behind the struggles.

Theories

At a very young age, one builds a personality or, in other words, a specific identification. Building this distinguishing recognition of oneself is a long, intricate process. Attempting to assess the process is broken down into many subcategories or theories, with factors or multiple pieces tied to one. Solving this puzzle is how theories like the Social Identity Theory (individuals identify with their social identity and personal identity, self-concepts, and shared characteristics with a group (Stokowski)) emerge. Knowing this, the groups one perceives to be apart are fundamental to one's identity. When put in an environment, searching for and embracing the already familiar groups will only be natural (Stokowski). Athletes are far separated from the majority “by racial and socioeconomic norms”(Mathews). In a cause-and-effect scenario, individuals who attach to similar groups are involuntarily shying away from the unusual groups. Through Similarity & principles of Social identity theory, black athletes naturally become a part of the minority. As a result, they put themselves in bubbles away from most students of other races. Black male athletes are putting themselves in very small bubbles. In 2006, at 65 high-major universities, “Black men were 2.4% of undergraduate students enrolled at the 65 universities, but 55% of football teams and 56% of men’s basketball teams on those campuses (Harper). You would think that the awareness of the college is a highly diverse environment, with 48.4% identifying as something other than caucasian (NCES).

Race and athletic identity go hand in hand because race is a significant factor in determining the strength of athletic identity (Mathews). The athletic involvement of black athletes can be intensified due to a trend of weakness in their sense of self, economic, family, and education, or the lack thereof. The lack of a sense of self causes black athletes to bubble themselves with only their team because they feel comfort and security in their teams and identify with their athletic roles more than athletes of different races.

A major downfall of being in a bubble is having a lack of “balance of an individual's resources” (Schlossberg), a significant part of the adaptation process; “the ultimate goal is for all individuals to adapt to their new environment” (Stokowski). When failing to adapt to environments, athletes, even though they should never use people as a means to an end when making connections with different groups of people, diverse windows and opportunities start to open. In a previously proven diverse environment like college, racial diversity is easily accessible. Maximizing the college experience for athletes means being more capable of positively transitioning out of sports into financially prosperous careers and not short-term jobs, because the idea behind higher education is to earn a degree for career advancement, an entry for higher-paying jobs. Escaping the bubble is essential for a better transition because athletes will have a more positive academic well-being (Moreland-bishop).

An athlete must have heavy student involvement (the physical and mental effort students put into interactions with faculty, studying, and other campus activities) to escape the cycle of trapping oneself in a social bubble. Social diversity increases when more student involvement is displayed (Lane). Doing this enhances a person's personality and, more specifically, an athlete's comfort outside of sports teams and racial circles (Lane). In the historical section, the evidence of black athletes' graduation rates being lower than black students graduation rates also backs up a separation between athletes and students outside of race. Athletes lacking heavy student involvement lose out on networking and, more importantly, skill-building. Oppose a student with a heavy student involvement who springs a new interest. Finding new interests and having a balanced social identity makes it easier for athletes to find groups that are familiar outside of sports teams or racial circles. Role theory (following the duties approved by societal norms of said society/group) claims that when people change their surroundings, they find new patterns of

adaptation (Blummer). The role theory assesses the internal interactionism of agency, process, and change, and it states that someone is capable of “changing both themselves and the social structures within which they exist” (McCall and Simmons). The issue is not with student athletes' ability to adapt to new environments, but because of the preconceived notions of how athletes should act. Role theory says one's role is essentially set by the expectations of others, and the athlete's entire community, coaches, tutors, and trainers, expect athletes to spend a lot of time together (Moreland-bishop). If not, they may believe an athlete is not completely invested in the sport (Adler). It's common knowledge that Division One athletes are expected to practice six or seven days a week and, on most days, multiple times, or in other words, serious involvement in athletics. Other practices are lifts, individual workouts, team meetings, time with athletic trainers, and more. For example, in 2024, the average day for a Duquesne basketball player was individual lifts at 6 am, going to two classes, and doing film study before 4 pm practice and individual workouts after. This leaves a very tight window for studies and even more room for social networking, nightlife, and other student life activities. Athletes spending hours upon hours getting better at sports together only makes the athletes' shared experiences of struggle stronger; therefore, when able to go to campus life activities like parties, they find it easy to be with their friends who feel like a community, or a word thrown around commonly in sports: brotherhood.

Black athletes' academic role (individual participation and commitment to academic environment and community) (Adler) involvement is just as crucial in role theory. The academic role focuses on the actual classroom and all people included. Returning to the insecurities that athletes feel in the classroom, they feel the same towards the entire academic community, students, professors, deans, and tutors, just like athletes usually feel secure and comfortable in the athletic community with their coaches, trainers, teammates, and others. The associated

feeling towards the athletics community affects the attitude towards the academic community because athletes expect to be treated with care or at least respect that displays value. After all, the athletic community respects bench players over starter athletes.

Of course, college coaches are required to reinforce the importance of being a student and academics. The message is usually to do what's expected (Adler). Coaches can also feel like restrictors to athletes who want to control their lives, especially romantic ones. For young men, a big part of mingling is looking for romantic partners, especially in university environments. The more they cling to their athletic identity, the permanent adjustments to the minds of athletes must happen to accept and become comfortable. When little is expected out of athletes, they believe it is expected of them athletically instead of academically (Lane). This is a simple series of events happening from cause and effect because, again, all that is expected of Athletes. Coaches also expect their players to be involved in few to no problems because they represent the team and are under a larger limelight than the average student(Adler). To avoid consequences that can arise from being intimately involved in groups of “regular students” who don't represent a sports team, Athletes then look at students as lesser than others in the internal sense of hierarchy, not only because they are expected not to build relationships with them, but because of the significant pedestal they are put on by the athletic community and university community as a whole. It's only a piece of an athlete's glorified self.

The glorified athletes believe themselves to be known as the glorified self and have heavy expansion and intensification of their athletic roles (Stawoski). Many negatives come with a glorified self, but most result from things athletes believe they are gaining because of the glory, fame, and initial short-lived success. For instance, they become celebrities to the people of the university and the town, and they give up their privacy in public(Adler). Since productive

athletes in the sport get put on a pedestal in my community, they put themselves on a high pedestal because one forms oneself through judgment and “reflected appraisals” (Rosenberg). This causes role conflicts between high-level athletes, treating other students as fans because they believe they are highly glorified, acting in their “public personas” (Adler), limiting authentic interactions. When athletes go out in public to have fun, because they believe that the students are not like them, they can't truly share a good time with them like they can with their teammates, with whom they have built genuine relationships. Thus, if good athletes interact this way, highly sought-after first-year students have the same or, if not bigger, glorified self from the expectation of praise. Major recruits then inform the jump, essentially interacting with the student body dismissively and building zero authentic relationships with the student body. This is a part of the role differentiation theory for discussing athletes leading a casual life, starting as early as recruitment in high school (Adler). Glorifying oneself heavily influences college athletes' academic lives; they must act self-protectively with classmates and professors. Adult professors are no different from students because they put early prejudices on athletes and their groups (Stawoski). The prejudgments cause friction in the relationships, therefore, a sense of insecurity in a place where athletes should have a cushion of comfort. The mood of athletes was studied in a test that suggests the more success a team had, the more negative their moods were in class (Matthews). The negative attitude towards classroom material backs up the idea of indirect effects through direct struggles in athletes' psychological struggle between athletic role and academic performance/role.

As athletes transition from recruit to freshman, freshman to sophomore, and so on, they only add fuel to the fire of more pressures, and the next step and expectation after the collegiate level is professional. Usually, their athletic roles expand rather than being a captain or getting

more involved in playing (Lane). When having a more pivotal role in the team, athletes begin clinging closer to their athletic identities, which reduces role involvement apart from the team. As undergraduate students go along, they begin to build career plans, participating in things like internships or career exposure events that further career maturity, providing exposure outside the university's and professors' basics. Athletes miss out on the basics from a lack of academic role involvement, resulting in no self-exploration, but even more importantly, they miss out on further career maturity events (Lane). The Glorified self causes athletes to have a high sense of self-essentially and not much self-awareness, especially in academics, because they chase glorification. Possibly the most negative effect of the everyday dismissive behavior athletes have, especially black athletes, may be the lack of preparation in career maturity or, in other words, “the development of a one-dismissal identity (Verkooijen).

As observed before, the NCAA has publicly stated that awareness of male athletes is a concern, and the graduation rates have improved for all athletes intentionally. On June 30, 2021, the NCAA passed the Name, Image, and Likeness policy that allows athletes to profit from their NIL rights. In the 20 power schools, the average athlete makes 179 thousand dollars per year (NCAA NIL). Hypothetically, it means a lot for changes in athletes' behavior, specifically intensified glorified self, because the backbone of glorifying oneself is the glorification from the athletic community, and NIL is a representation of more glory given through resources. Resources are provided to athletes by the athletic community, such as gym time and minutes played. Gear, etc., makes athletes feel valued by the community. Large amounts of money are even more valued by American society than small gifts, and therefore, are more valued by individuals. If this is true, that NIL intensifies the glorification of oneself, their social identity, and academic role involvement is even more at stake than before. The glorification of oneself is

becoming stronger for modern age athletes for other reasons, too. Media exposure grows with every generation of athletes; high school athletes are also allowed to receive NIL money, but because of social media, highly sought-after and even low-sought-after athletes are. For example, the No. 1 player in the class has 5 million followers across all platforms, and the average athlete has thousands or hundreds of thousands of followers. Opposed to before, when athletes first entered sports, athletes were new to the simple newspapers and interviews (Adler). Athletes, especially high prospects, are exposed to media at a younger age, and they become used to dealing with even larger forms of press due to having a large following and name, image, and likeness deals.

Conclusion

Black athletes are often sidelined in the broad academic and social environments that hinder growth outside of athletics, even though they're central figures in athletics. When examining the extremely complex reality regarding Black athletes' physical interactions, regarding transition from sports to post-collegiate lives, it's evident that social, cultural, and institutional issues create personal frameworks in the "common athlete". High amounts of pressure that cause stress, push athletes to cling to their athletic identities, and intensify a glorified self, and limit the academic acclaim. The glorification of oneself and the image that the university and community promote hinders emotional well-being and essential development. Creating an offset that impacts graduation rates and job readiness makes athletes mentally vulnerable when their playing days end, having very few skills or networks to rely on when transitioning into their own lives.

The NCAA continues to look to improve the issues surrounding the graduation rates, but the passing of NIL puts athletes even more at risk. That's why it's critical to increase the societal

awareness around the problems and prioritize the development of Black student athletes. When doing this, and promoting student involvement, challenges the glorification culture, and reimagining the norms of coaches, institutions, and even the peers and players to support athletes' complete identity. The goal should be to prepare young men for transitions out of sports, just as much for championships, and empower them to use discipline, visibility, and leadership that they learn in sports to be financially stable for the long term and have mental stability. The cycle will continue, and because of name, image, and likeness, it will get worse, and the generations of Black athletes will keep falling through the cracks.

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