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Framing Possibilities: Representations of black student athletes in Toronto media

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Abstract

This article draws upon a weekly feature in the *Toronto Star* newspaper, the “High School Report,” to explore the representations of black male student athletes over the school year 2003/2004. These media representations contribute to an understanding of the wider social reality of student athletes. Our investigation points to the fact that the media present black male students compared to their white counterparts as giving priority to athletics over academics. By ignoring the structural inequities they face in schools and society, the media contribute to a popular discourse which frames the social and educational possibilities of black male students in limiting ways.

Résumé

Cet article tire ses renseignements de l'article hebdomadaire du journal *Toronto Star*: le Rapport sur les écoles secondaires “High School Report,” , pour examiner la représentation des athlètes-étudiants noirs pendant l'année scolaire 2003-2004. Ces représentations dans la presse contribuent à la compréhension d'une réalité plus large dans la société pour les athlètes-étudiants. Notre examen pointe au fait que la presse représente les athlètes-étudiants noirs comme plus inclinés aux sports qu'aux études scolaires que les athlètes-étudiants blancs. En ignorant les iniquités structurelles auxquelles les athlètes-étudiants doivent faire face à l'école comme dans la société, la presse se donne au discours populaire qui encadre les possibilités sociales et éducationnelles des étudiants noirs d'une façon limitée.

Introduction

In any given school year, hundreds of thousands of Canadian high school students participate on sports teams, while countless more engage in other recreational pursuits. In fact, in the Greater Toronto Area alone the number of high school athletes has been estimated at somewhere in excess of 90,000 students (*Toronto Star*, December 17, 2003). Perhaps as a result of the overwhelmingly large numbers of students who count sports participation as a vital part of their schooling experience, media organizations have over the years sought, in a variety of ways, to distinguish those student athletes who excel in particular sports. For example, the *Toronto Star* – one of Toronto's largest daily newspapers – has a weekly feature called the “High School Report” which appears in the newspaper's sports section every Wednesday during the school year. Among its most identifiable features is its weekly selection of an elite high school athlete from Toronto who is prominently photographed and written

about. The tone of these weekly features tends to be celebratory in the ways it informs readers about the various successes, challenges and aspirations of the selected student athletes. However, as regular readers of the “High School Report,” we have often questioned the racial constructions of the student athletes represented. Specifically, we observed that black students, especially males, tend to be represented in fewer sports compared to their white peers, and they tend to be much more resolute in their reported athletic interests and aspirations; with little indication of a similar commitment to academics. Based on these observations, we carried out a more systematic investigation of the *Toronto Star’s* “High School Report” for the school year 2003/2004. Accordingly, we asked: To what extent do media representations re-inscribe existing constructions of black male student athletes in Canadian schools? And how might these representations frame the possibilities of black male student athletes?

Solomon (1992) writes that in Canadian schools, the constructions of black male students as athletes have significant consequences. In his examination of a multiracial school in Toronto, he found that both white and black students nurtured *myths of black athletic superiority*. In the case of white students, many withdrew from school sports and conceded to black athletes whom they viewed as athletically superior (see also Harrison Jr. et al., 2004). On the other hand, black students gravitated towards sports to validate their schooling identities. According to Solomon (1992), “This is not a difficult task for them to accomplish. They are motivated by images of successful black athletes in the media.... In addition, they are helped along by teachers and coaches who create the opportunity structure to ‘develop their talents’” (p. 71). As a consequence, teachers and coaches tended to invest much more time developing and encouraging black students’ athletic potential as opposed to their academic potential. The result was that black students were more apt to identify with their athletic roles in schools (Solomon, 1992). Based on his study of four black male student basketball players in Toronto, James (2003) concluded that “Because a number of black students demonstrate strong abilities and skills in athletics compared to academic subjects, and productively participate in school if given opportunities to play sports, educators will encourage them in athletics” (p. 127; see also Hall, 2002).

As a result of the attitudes of their teachers, coaches and peers which they often perceive as being negative or unsupportive toward academic pursuits, sports can thus take on an important role in the fulfillment of a masculine identity status for black male adolescents. In this regard, athletic participation – in its valuing of dominant societal values such as aggression, competition and winning – often becomes an avenue where black males can hope to achieve a public masculine status that is frequently denied them in other educational contexts. As Majors (1990) writes: “contemporary black males often utilize sports as one means of masculine self expression within an otherwise limited structure of opportunity” (p. 109). However, as Messner (1990) tells us in

distinguishing hegemonic masculinities (i.e. white, male, middle class) from marginalized masculinities, for marginalized students, the pursuit of success in sports isn't just "an added proof of masculinity; [it is] often their only hope of achieving a public masculine status."(p. 104). In this context, sports participation can provide young black males with an avenue for achievement and a positive space for self-expression.

However, the long term effects of these masculine constructions of blackness, which often prize athletic achievements over intellectually oriented activities, can serve to limit opportunities for black males in Canadian schools and society. In this sense, there is a somewhat paradoxical push toward engulfment into athletic subcultures for black male youth. On the one hand, sports do provide an area of self-expression and prospective achievement that can enable these youth to negotiate societal institutions such as schooling that they perceive to not be meeting their needs, interests and aspirations (Ogden & Hilt, 2003). On the other hand, an over emphasis on sports participation can work to severely limit the possibilities of black youth, as the future opportunities provided by sport are exceedingly limited (Coakley, 1998).

In this context, then, studies of the connections between race, sport and education inform us that in large Canadian urban centers such as Toronto, athletic-identified high school students – many of them black males – tend to be both influenced by media and affirmed in these identifications by educators and coaches (James, 2005; Solomon, 1992). In light of this, we view representations and/or constructions such as those in the "High School Report" as influencing and helping to frame the schooling experiences and imagined possibilities of black student athletes, for as Kellner (1996) states: "media culture is the stage in which our social conflicts are played out and our social reality is constructed" (p. 465). As such, we investigate these media representations in terms of their contributions to an understanding of the wider social reality of student athletes – i.e. their social, cultural and educational worlds – rather than in terms of issues of production, reporter intentions, or direct audience interpretations (Davis, 1993; James, 2005; Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999).

Importantly, we acknowledge that people create their own meanings in their negotiations of texts based on a variety of factors related to social, cultural and historical understandings (Dimitraïdis, 2001); and that all 'readings' of text and their subsequent interpretations – and in this case our own as researchers – represent one potential textual 'reading' out of the possibility of several (Curtin, 1995; Johnson, 1986). As such, we concur with Duncan (1990) who states: "Responsible textual studies do not assert with absolute certainty how particular texts are interpreted. But they suggest the kinds of interpretations that may take place.... Ultimately, these interpretations must be judged on the basis of the persuasiveness and logic of the researcher's discussion" (p. 27). In this regard, with reference to original newspaper reports, we discuss the meanings that might be drawn from what is reported, noting how and why the interpretation of such meanings is plausible within the existing Canadian social and educational context (Hall, 1975; see also Curtin, 1995).

Race, sport and media: A conceptual frame

According to Hartmann (2000), the usual ways of thinking about race and sport can be separated into two categories: popular ideologies and scholarly critiques. Popular ideologies emphasize sport's uniqueness as an area within which marginalized groups can expect to attain opportunity and enjoy possibilities that are absent in other areas of life. Governed by rules and regulations that presumably ensure fair play, these possibilities are said to emphasize progress, harmony and opportunities as well as serve as an avenue by which role models and heroes can be looked up to and emulated. However, research tells us that the promotion of these understandings by media and society in general is frequently based upon conjecture rather than substantive research (Coakley, 1988). As such, scholarly critiques often dispute the claims put forth by popular ideologies, and instead offer alternative ways within which to frame understandings of race and sport. Hartmann (2000) divides these interpretations into two sub-categories – 'institutional approaches' and 'culturalist orientations.'

Institutional approaches emphasize the view that racial discrimination exists in sports, just as it does in society. This is evidenced in the differences in sport participation of black and white students in Canada– while blacks tend to have a high rate of participation in a few high visibility sports, they are virtually absent from representation in others. Further, the institutional approach emphasizes the underreported yet exceedingly dismal odds of achieving any kind of prolonged career success through athletics, a fact which can function to limit the possibilities of black student athletes who frequently profess career aspirations related to sport (Coakley, 1998).

Culturalist orientations, on the other hand, operate from the recognition that in spite of racial discrimination, many black athletes have achieved success, recognition and acclaim through sport and have indeed benefited from their athletic participation. However, the culturalist perspective holds that this recognition has a potentially destructive side, in that it has left expansive audiences with images of highly paid and successful black athletes that are disconnected from social realities. In fact, a wide gap exists between the class position of successful athletes and most blacks. Furthermore, the widespread dissemination of media representations that uncritically perpetuate and reinforce these understandings can result in a context whereby successful black athletes come to be viewed as "floating racial signifiers" to be emulated or admired as proof of achievement (Hartmann, 2000, p. 238). As a consequence, media representations can serve to minimize more persistent problems of structural racism and inequality, and can make it seem as though there are no barriers to success and mobility in society. In doing so, the media legitimizes meritocratic ideals about social mobility and opportunity through sport (Hartmann, 2000).

In essence, the idea that minority student athletes are able to succeed educationally and socially through sports is only partially true. Indeed, as Hartmann (2000) cautions, we should not be "exchanging one totalization (that sport is a positive force for racial change) for the other (that it is a negative,

impeding one)” (p. 240). Rather, he suggests that sport must be viewed as a “contested racial terrain,” where racial meanings are struggled over rather than uniformly advanced or inhibited (p. 241). In this ‘contested terrain,’ then, the media, like school, plays a significant role in contributing to the struggle over the meanings and understandings we might glean of black male students and their educational, athletic and social possibilities. In this work, we are concerned with the ways in which media images as presented in the “High School Report” ‘totalize’ the fact that the athletic, educational and social possibilities of black male students can best be attained through sports. Such uncritical, one-sided representations, rooted in a hegemonic racial discourse, merely glamorize possibilities without giving consideration to the inequitable social and educational structures that mediate the outcomes of all students generally.

The Sample

We identified eighteen male student athletes who were singled-out in feature articles in the *Toronto Star*’s “High School Report” during the 2003-2004 school year (see Table 1). In order to be included in our sample, student athletes had to be photographed and individually featured (which occurred in the vast majority of cases) so that we could readily identify them by race.¹ However, we did not include in our sample those cases in which coaches or entire teams were featured. We also drew on other contents within the *Toronto Star*’s “High School Report” to inform our understandings of what was being reported.² In seeking to more determinedly focus our investigation, we omitted from our examination representations of female student athletes that appeared in the “High School Report” as we felt that such examinations would have necessitated taking into account understandings that were beyond the scope and length of this article. As such, our aim here was to make available our readings on some of the problematic ways in which male student athletes are represented and constructed by media.

Representations of black student athletes in Toronto media

Black student athletes as ‘naturals’

In his discussion of the cultural assumptions and presumed innate superiority of black athletes in the American context, Hartmann (2000) writes:

The fact that so many people from such various backgrounds and political orientations are nevertheless obsessed with discovering underlying physiological causes for African American athletic excellence itself provides, in my view, a telling insight into the deeply problematic cultural assumptions implicated in the intersections of race and sport...(p. 232; see also Hoberman, 1997; Price, 1997).

Problematic as they may be, our readings of the “High School Report” indicate that these assumptions are evident in media representations of black student athletes, and in the perceptions of their coaches and educators. As Table 1

TABLE I
Toronto Star Featured Athletes, Male, 2003/2004

Name	Date	Age & Grade	Region	Race	Sport	Col/Univ Sport Aspirations
H. Lechebo	Oct. 1 2003	18/N L	Toronto	Black	Track/Run	US (NCAA)
J. Akuoko	Oct. 5 2003	15/10	Toronto	Black	Soccer	Professional
K. McCartney	Oct. 29 2003	15/10	Aurora	Black	Football	US (NCAA)
I. Savory	Nov. 5 2003	18/12	Toronto	Black	Football	US ("Big time football")
W. Brock	Nov. 12 2003	18/12	York	White	Football	Can or US (NCAA)
T. Carter	Nov. 19 2003	16/11	Aurora	Black	Football	US (NCAA)
M. Morris	Nov. 19 2003	18/12	Toronto	White	Football	None listed
A. Tombler	Nov. 26 2003	17/12	Toronto	White	Football	None listed
R. Williams	Dec. 3 2003	17/12	Toronto	Black	Basketball	Professional
D. Evans	Jan. 4 2004	18/12	Milton	White	Wrestler	None listed
C. Niles	Jan. 21 2004	17/12	Don Mls	Black	Basketball	US (NCAA) and NBA
R. Hinds	Feb. 18 2004	17/12	Toronto	Black	Bask./Foot	US (NCAA) and NBA
D. Spencer	Feb. 25 2004	17/12	Toronto	White	Swim	None Listed
W. Ngai	Mar. 3 2004	17/11	Toronto	Asian	Hockey	Professional
V. Naudzuinas	Mar. 10 2004	18/12	Toronto	White	Basketball	US (NCAA) or Can
M. Wilson	Apr. 1 2004	17/11	Pickering	White	Baseball	US (NCAA)
K. Tuul	May 5 2004	18/12	Pickering	White	Surf/Rug	None listed
D. Wolfe	June 16 2004	18/12	Toronto	White	Baseball	US (NCAA)

indicates, blacks compared to white student athletes tend to be clustered in fewer sports. For instance, of the eight black male student athletes profiled, three each participate in basketball and football, while one participates in track and field and soccer. In contrast, the nine white student athletes represented are said to participate in football, basketball, wrestling, rugby, swimming, surfing and baseball.³ And while black student athletes are typically represented in basketball, football, and to a lesser extent, soccer and track and field, white students conversely are represented in a wider variety of sports in addition to those sports dominated by blacks.⁴ This difference in sports participation is likely a product of socio-economic class as well as race (Coakley, 1998; Jones

and Armour, 2000), in that the high cost of playing certain sports – for example hockey – operates as an access barrier for blacks who as a marginalized group in Canadian society do not enjoy the same economic privileges as dominant white group members (Henry et al., 2000). Hence, blacks' participation in a variety of sports is limited to sports that are economically affordable to them.

In this context, tied to factors such as socio-economic class and to gendered constructions of masculinity as described earlier, the "High School Report" tends to articulate a racialized discourse in its portrayal of black athletes. For example, in the October 1, 2003 edition of the "High School Report", readers are introduced to Henok Lechebo, an 18-year old who immigrated to Canada from Ethiopia in 1997, and now competes for his school as a middle distance runner. Of Lechebo, a black male, we are told that "Nothing has stopped the West Toronto Collegiate student, also the school athlete of the year last June, to digress from what he does best – run" (Grossman, p. F8). Readers are further told that years ago as a grade nine student, "with no practice and a chewed-up pair of running shoes, he won his first race..." (Grossman, p. F8). Similarly, we learn that in his most recent race, he "once more showed off his amazing talent causing those witnessing him in the heat of a race to again rub their eyes in disbelief" (Grossman, p. F8). With such descriptors as: his "amazing talent," doing "what he does best – run" and winning his first race despite his "chewed up" shoes and having had "no practice," the reporter demonstrates Lechebo's considerable athletic talent and abilities. In fact, we learn little else about Lechebo outside of his athletic talents.⁵ And while undoubtedly impressive, we wonder about Lechebo as a student: Has he not faced any challenges in his transition from Ethiopia to Canada – schooling and otherwise? Has his role as a 'runner' somehow encompassed his entire schooling identity, as this article seems to imply? And has sport been used as a means of adjusting to his educational, cultural and economic conditions in Canada (James, 2003; Henry et al., 2000). Lechebo's exclusivist construction as an athlete raises these and other questions, particularly when we ponder the closing statement of his coach, who among other things says that, "Most of his achievement comes from his natural ability" (Grossman, p. F8). This comment suggests to us that Lechebo's construction as an athlete is not merely a product of the media, but one that plays out in varying ways in his schooling situation – a notion that we will take up more fully later on.

Similar questions could be asked in relation to Karl McCartney, a 15-year-old football player who is also black. His coach, we are told, "won't forget the time Karl McCartney walked into his office at St. Andrew's College and asked about playing for the school team. [The coach], who didn't know much about the youngster, glanced at his impressive physical size, smiled, and told him to pull up a chair" (Grossman, October 9, 2003, p. C10). Here we learn that McCartney's "impressive physical size" captures the attention of the coach who later praises the "all-natural ability" of McCartney. So too, is the "natural

ability” of basketball player Ronnie Williams drawn to our attention. Specifically, this occurs in an article that begins: “Give Ronnie Williams a basketball and watch him dazzle;” and continues, “Watching the 6-foot point guard goof around with a basketball, and then use his natural ability in games to score easy points...has the Saints coaching staff marveling at his ability...” (Grossman, December 3, 2003, p. C9). Such representations by the media reporter and coaches alike tend to convey the idea that black student athletes possess “natural” athletic abilities which account for their athletic predispositions and successes.

In contrast, the majority of the white students are represented as working hard to realize their successes in sports. For instance, although we are told that McCartney is “never in the weight room” and yet “has mind boggling strength” in that he “has bench pressed 300 pounds without breaking a sweat” (Grossman, October 29, 2003) we also learn that Mike Wilson, a white baseball player, improved himself athletically as a result of “hard work in the gym” (Grossman, April 21, 2004, p. C7). Such is also the case for Matt Morris, a white football player who is similarly credited for his hard work and commitment toward *making* himself into a successful athlete (Grossman, November 19b, 2003, p. C4). In fact, while the majority of black students in the “High School Report” are praised or sensationalized in terms of their ‘natural’ or other such qualities – often explicitly and at times more subtly – in only one instance did we find a white male student who was represented in this way (see Grossman, May 5, 2004, p. C7).⁶

These constructions raise questions about the implications for the schooling possibilities of these and other black student athletes with similar experiences. For example, in the case of Lechebo, who seemed to display an obvious talent as a runner, we wonder: Did his talents as a runner cause those around him to minimize or neglect his possible needs, interests and aspirations in other areas of schooling? Similarly, we wonder about the schooling implications for McCartney who was immediately identified by his coach as an athlete simply upon seeing him. While attempting to glean possible answers to such questions solely from media representations is clearly limited, research points to the fact that participating in sports can indeed negatively stigmatize black students in a number of instances (Solomon, 1992). In this regard, what is often implied in constructing black students as athletes is the perception of an inverse relationship to intellectual capacities (Hall, 2002).

Black ‘students’ or black ‘athletes’

In the context of our findings based on the “High School Report,” then, it would appear that the athletic roles of a number of black male student athletes are indeed being prioritized at the expense of other areas of schooling, thus contributing to schooling success being defined by athletic rather than academic achievements. For example, although Lechebo, McCartney and Williams are all steadily praised for their athletic talents, only tacit indications are given to how they are faring academically. Nonetheless, there are indications that they may be

experiencing academic difficulties. In the case of Lechebo, we learn that apart from his athletic accomplishments, he “spent much of the past summer taking courses to shore up a few grades” (Grossman, October 1, 2003, p. F8). An interpretation of this statement might be that Lechebo attended school in the summer as a result of not having met course requirements during the regular school year. A similar understanding can be drawn about basketball player Williams whose “priority other than basketball,” we are told, “is to boost his academic grades in his graduating year,” with the hope that doing so will provide sporting opportunities beyond high school (Grossman, December 3, 2003, p, C9). Again, if his grades do need a “boost” in order to further his basketball career, this seems to indicate that they are not at a level which would enable him to win a university scholarship. And, in the case of McCartney, there is no mention of grades at all. Instead, the only information readers are given of his schooling outside of his athletic talents is the fact that he once suffered a disciplinary transgression that caused him to be suspended from his school for two weeks (Grossman, October 29, 2003). So, the representations of these student athletes tend to focus almost exclusively on athletic achievement.

In this regard, the representation of Johnson Akuoko is worth considering. In the October 15, 2003 article entitled “Teen Star has high hopes for soccer life,” Akuoko, a black male student, is described in the following way: “At 15 years of age, Johnson Akuoko just might be the best high school soccer player in Toronto. In fact, he’s so good that he can hardly wait to get out of town and begin a professional soccer career” (Grossman, p. C4). The article goes on to say that Akuoko has traveled to his home in England twice over the past month alone, and that he hopes to play professional soccer there at the age of 17 years. While much of the article is written in a celebratory tone and with praises from his vice-principal and coach who describe him as “gifted” and who are “amazed” by him, not quoted by Akuoko, his coach or his vice principal is his academic record. In a manner reminiscent of other media representations of black students, readers are only informed of the following: “Akuoko, who has below average Grade 10 marks in three of four academic courses, says he is simply putting in time” (p. Grossman, p. C4). That Akuoko would be singularly praised in this media and in turn by his vice principal and coach – indeed distinguished as a model of student athlete success – despite the fact that he is struggling academically, is symptomatic of much of the media’s discourse on black student athletes as having possibilities in sports more than in academics.⁷

On the other hand, white student athletes are constructed in markedly different ways in the “High School Report.” For example, white swimmer Dave Spencer is said to have a “nifty 93 percent academic average” (Grossman, February 25, 2004, p. E4). Similarly, three other white students are cited as having high grades (see Grossman, March 10, May, 5 and June 16, 2004). Unlike the representation of most of the black students – which as we have seen, often show academic and/or disciplinary problems – several of the white

students tend to be credited for their academic achievements and none are reported to be having any academic and/or disciplinary problems

In one instance, the disciplinary problems of a black student seem to be overstated. We refer here to football player Ishamar Savory, described as one of the “top high school running backs in Toronto” who was “booted out of Birchmount Park Collegiate last year following a verbal and physical confrontation with a teacher...” (Grossman, November 5, 2003, p. C9). The reporter goes on to say that Savory was charged with assault and expelled from school for seven months,⁸ and that once admitted to a different school and attempting to play football, teachers from his previous school intervened petitioning the board’s athletic association to ban Savory from participating in sports for the rest of his high school career. We learn that this request was not supported by the administration of his new school. In fact, Savory’s vice-principal is quoted as saying: “I haven’t had a single incident with him and I can assure you that he wouldn’t be playing football if he weren’t doing well” (Grossman, p. C9). It is not clear to us if the reporting of Savory’s disciplinary problem, framed as a consequence of his familial and economic situation (see note 7) is an attempt to demonstrate his perseverance, resilience and commitment to sport; or to show how disciplinary concerns are set aside for students such as Savory who seem to have a need to participate in sport in order to maintain their interests in school and as a postsecondary option (James, 2005). According to Savory, “I love football and would like to make it big someday, but going to school and getting my education is what it’s all about” (Grossman, p. C9). The case of Oliver Prince comes to mind here as well. Like Savory, Prince also had disciplinary problems that seemed to have been overlooked or excused by his coaches because of his importance to the team. In reporting on Prince’s behaviour, the reporter writes: “Oliver’s recent erratic behaviour on the court would get most people kicked off the team. But Oliver’s not most people” (Campbell, June 12, 2003, p. C10).

Missing from the representation and discussion of the disciplinary problems of these black student athletes are their racialized schooling experiences (Dei et al. 1997), the consequences of which can make participation in sports an important, if not necessary, activity in their negotiation of school (James, 2005). Interestingly, these representations also operate to maintain their images as athletes not only among peers and educators but also in the media – media that portray them as more likely to succeed in athletics rather than in academics through the support of coaches, administrators and teachers. Undoubtedly, these representations play a role in the aspirations that black student athletes construct for themselves, as well as in those that are constructed for them by media, their coaches, educators and school administrators (James, 2005).

Post high school possibilities: US scholarships and professional sports career aspirations

In many ways, the agency that black student athletes exercise both in school and in their postsecondary plans is informed by their interactions with peers, educators and coaches, their schooling experiences, and their reading of the media's constructions of their possibilities and aspirations. Our concern here is with aspirations, and as such the following representations of black student athletes in the "High School Report" 2003/2004 are instructive.

Henok Lechebo:

"But it's down the road... that Lechebo really needs to strengthen his chances of a lucrative U.S. scholarship" (Grossman, October 1, 2003, p. F8).

Johnson Akuoko:

"Akuoko hopes to end up next year playing for Millwall, an English First Division team" (Grossman, October 15, 2003, p. C4).

Karl McCartney:

"McCartney's plan is to get attention, similar to what he received this past summer while attending football camp at the university of Miami..."(Grossman, October 29, 2003, p. C10).

Ishamar Savory:

" 'I love football and would like to make it big someday...' " (Grossman, November 5, 2003, p. C9).

Thaine Carter

"Carter said he wanted to move because of 'new opportunities in football, a better education, and the exposure to big time universities'" (Grossman, November 19a, 2003, p. C4).

Ronnie Williams

"Williams has dreams of playing in the NBA⁹ someday" (Grossman, December 3, 2003, p. C9).

Corey Niles

" 'I consider myself to be a good player and, like every kid, dream about playing in the NBA' "

"... has received NCAA¹⁰ interest from schools in Vermont and North Carolina" (Grossman, January 21, 2004, E6).

Ryan Hinds

" 'He'll return to North Toronto next season to boost his grades and improve his chances at an NCAA football scholarship'" (Grossman, February 18, 2004, p. C4).

As can be seen from the above excerpts, our data indicates that all eight of the black student athletes featured in our sample of the "High School Report" have been represented as destined for professional sport careers and/or athletic scholarships to US universities. This contrasts sharply with what we are told of whites, of whom less than half are represented as having aspirations toward US sport scholarships (see Table 1). In fact, for many of them, no speculation on

their athletic futures is made at all. This fact may not be surprising given what we have previously seen of the representations of white student athletes, who are more resolutely depicted as high academic achievers rather than “natural” athletes.

Perhaps as a result of racialized media representations such as these, sport related postsecondary aspirations reflect a frequently held ambition among many black male high school athletes in Toronto (James, 2003). However, significant in the context of the reporting of these aspirations, are the much less publicized probabilities of realizing these goals. For example, in writing about basketball, the sport most often associated with black athletic participation, Sperber (1995) states: “The lure of an athletic scholarship is similar to the appeal of the lottery, with the chance of an individual winning almost as remote...In any given year, about 90,000 [U.S.] black male high-school seniors play organized basketball at inner city or poor rural schools. About 1,100 of them are offered ‘full-ride’ athletic scholarships. Thus, about 1 percent of such seniors win the basketball lottery” (p. 59). Furthermore, on the chances of making it professionally, Simons and Butow (1997) tell us: “The odds that any high school athlete will play a sport on the professional level are remote – about 10,000 to 1. As far as probabilities go, there’s a better chance of, say, taking a coin, flipping it, and having it land on heads 13 times in row” (p. 46). Finally, with regard to Canadian student athletes specifically, these odds are even still exponentially lower (Higgins, 2003).

Yet in spite of these statistics, media such as the “High School Report” continue to present athletic scholarships and professional sport career aspirations as viable options for black male students with no attempts to articulate the remoteness of such possibilities. In fact, the media are frequently complicitous in glamourizing these postsecondary possibilities when it comes to the representation of black student athletes (James, 2005). For example, readers expecting to find the “High School Report” in the January 7, 2004, edition of the *Toronto Star*, instead found a large picture and adjoining article on LeBron James, an African-American basketball player who made international news for his basketball skills as a teenager. James is presented as a successful 18-year-old student athlete who was drafted into the NBA directly out of high school, a noteworthy occurrence. As such, readers are told that “he shows maturity well beyond his years” and that “last year at this time, he was basically wasting time dominating high schoolers.” The article goes on to mention – in more than one instance – his \$90 million shoe endorsement from Nike in addition to his \$13 million contract as an NBA player (Smith, January 7, 2004, p. E3). Placing the profile of James in the *Toronto Star* in a space normally reserved for local Toronto-area high school athletes, can be seen as suggesting to student athletes that they too might consider going directly from high school to the NBA. We wonder about this implicit message and the implication it might hold for Toronto student athletes, most of whom are far-removed from the observing eyes of US scouts and coaches. In our view, these representations or messages

could conceivably lead to misconceptions by student athletes about their career paths vis-à-vis playing collegial and professional sports.

Importantly then, the media's role in helping to frame elite student athletes' understandings about their possibilities is significant, and can contribute to a situation whereby students come to strongly identify with their athletic roles in constructing their schooling experiences, interests and in this case their aspirations (Adler & Adler, 1999). On the other hand, we feel compelled to emphasize that in addition to the role that media play in informing the understandings black students have of their athletic possibilities, they also do make choices – however restricted or limited in the face of structural inequalities and barriers (e.g. racism/ discrimination) – that operate to circumscribe their agency and opportunities. Accordingly, we read these reported aspirations and possibilities as part of a subculture related to the marginalized, racialized and assimilative structures of schools and society (Dei, 1997). In this subculture, sport skills, constructed as signifiers of blackness and masculinity, not only serve as a means by which black student athletes are able to attain admiration, high-esteem, and acknowledgement, but also paradoxically, as means by which they can expect to realize their aspirations.

Conclusion

In sum, our findings indicate that black male students are concentrated in few sports where they are frequently depicted as “natural” athletes, a contention that coaches and educators represented in this media often seem to endorse. Our reading of the “High School Report” would also seem to indicate that black male students – through the frequent support of coaches and educators – are regularly prioritizing their athletic roles in schools, often at the expense of academics. In this regard, these media representations seem to support the notion that the possibilities open to black male students for success in schools are more often than not tied to athletic success. Finally, the pursuit of athletic scholarships to U.S. universities is often presented as a reachable goal in the “High School Report.” In this case, student athletes pursuing or having obtained such scholarships – most often black students – are celebrated as signifiers of success, this despite much research which has shown that achieving these scholarships are exceptionally difficult and potentially destructive in their pursuit.

We view the representations of the schooling experiences and possibilities of black student athletes by the media as an indication of the larger social, cultural and educational context in which, as James (2003) points out, black Canadian students struggle against their marginalization and disengagement from the schooling process leading to their “poor educational performance, and few making it to university or college” (p. 127). And as Dei et al. (1997) assert, schools have inadequately addressed the complexities that have shaped and continue to shape and influence black students' schooling in Canada. So, while black male students might appear to frequently benefit from the

adulation of admiring educators, coaches and media reporters in their representations, these representations also seem to re-inscribe the existing discourse on black males and their schooling possibilities. Namely, black males are largely shown to be struggling in school, and sports participation is seen as an alternative where success is a possibility, both in school and beyond.

However, in their glamorization and uncritical depictions of these possibilities, alternative understandings are clearly ignored. By ignoring the structural realities faced by many black male student athletes in schools, the media, in our reading, seem to be subscribing to the popular discourse which frames their present and future educational possibilities as largely available through sport. And while not knowing the specific ways in which these representations will be taken up by those profiled, we contend that media representations such as those we have examined do provide a cultural record where we might begin to understand the larger social formations within which these students exist. In this regard, our findings indicate that for black male student athletes, the line between student and athlete has become blurred, and educators, coaches, and parents of these student athletes would best support them by taking notice.

Notes:

1. Although we identify students by race, we concur with much contemporary research in the social sciences which identifies race as a socially constructed and contested category (see Goldberg, 1993). Nonetheless, we use this term with the understanding that it has real consequences in its constructions.
2. Other contents comprising the “High School Report” include weekly selections of ‘Athletes of the week’ and various information regarding the latest news on the Toronto high school sports scene.
3. One student of Chinese ancestry is also represented in our sample. He is the only other racial group student that was represented. As a result, we hesitate to draw any conclusions from his singular representation, although we do read the under-representation of Asians as well as the omission of other racial group students to be significant. Clearly, more research is needed to adequately address this issue.
4. Although hockey participation is not represented within our sample, other areas of the “High School Report” – e.g. its weekly selection of two high school ‘athletes of the week’ – indicate that white students participate in hockey in much larger numbers in comparison to Blacks.
5. A fact, which as we will demonstrate later on, takes on added significance when contrasting Lechebo’s and other black students’ representations with those of whites, the latter of whom are frequently characterized by more holistic representations in which sports participation is somewhat de-emphasized.
6. Importantly, we stress that not all students are similarly racialized. In fact, black male students are at times represented as ‘hard workers’ (see Grossman, February 18, 2004, p. C4), just as whites are at times depicted as naturals (again, we found one such case – see Grossman, May 5, 2004, p. C7).

7. The one exception in our sample is the representation of black student football player Thaine Carter (see Grossman, November 19a, 2003). In Carter, readers are arguably presented with a student athlete who has a diversity of interests in which sport is one.
8. It was reported that Savory's actions resulted from "mitigating circumstances in his life" (Grossman, p. C9), which included the death of one parent and the financial hardships of another. Readers are told that this prompted Savory to find part-time work as a construction worker.
9. NBA – National Basketball Association, recognized as the top professional basketball league in the world.
10. NCAA – National Collegiate Athletic Association, this is the governing body of most US university sports – playing in an NCAA league is a coveted goal for many athletes in North America.

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