"Please Don't Fine Me Again!!!!!": Black Athletic Defiance in the NBA and NFL
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This article examines the contentious relationship between contemporary Black professional athletes and organizational authority, particularly in the National Football League (NFL) and National Basketball Association (NBA). It considers the rationalization given by both leagues for the rise of stringent guidelines regarding appearance and sportsmanship. The article then focuses on how some Black athletes contest these guidelines, particularly through acts of defiance and an adherence to hip-hop and street culture. The essay concludes by considering the current and possible effects of these players’ defiance both for the players themselves and the leagues in which they play.

Keywords: black athletes; hip-hop; subculture and style; sports and hegemony

In December 2003, after scoring his first touchdown against the San Francisco 49ers, Cincinnati Bengals’ wide receiver Chad Johnson reached into a snowbank and withdrew a sign that read “DEAR NFL, PLEASE DON’T FINE ME AGAIN!!!!!!” Johnson, who by the 2003 season had become one of the National Football League’s (NFL) most penalized athletes due to his elaborate touchdown celebrations and dress code violations, was well aware of the penalties he would incur. However, he was not concerned “[The touchdown celebrations are] fun. It’s part of the game. They can’t take that away from us. I’ve got to continue to do what I do. That’s just Chad” (Feeling Fine, 2003). For his efforts, he received a US$10,000 penalty from the NFL.

After frequent penalties and some chiding from Bengals’ coach Marvin Lewis, Johnson vowed to tone down his celebrations; however, his promises were short-lived. During the first game of the 2007 season, Johnson was penalized for a touchdown celebration that involved him trotting off the field and donning an oversized golden blazer with “FUTURE H.O.F. 20???” emblazoned on the rear. The subsequent penalty did not discourage him for, as he revealed in the November 2007 issue of Gentleman’s Quarterly, “This year s going to be ridiculous . . . I’ve got all sixteen celebrations planned.” (Penn, 2007, p. 176).
Johnson is certainly not alone for many of the NFL’s superstars, most of whom are Black, have been fined as a result of touchdown celebrations and dress code violations some of which are not nearly as extravagant as Johnson’s violations. For example, in November 2007, Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Terrell Owens, no stranger to NFL touchdown penalties, was fined US$10,000 for waving a towel that apparently violated NFL uniform and equipment rules (Watkins, 2007). Because the NFL adopted stiffer rules on uniforms, touchdown celebrations, and taunting, Black athletes have borne the brunt and with little surprise: After all, these rules were specifically intended for Black athletes.

The NFL is not the only league enforcing stern rules on its Black players’ appearance and sportsmanship; the National Basketball Association (NBA) also has ushered in a series of strict guidelines, the most fervent being a dress code that requires players to dress in “business casual” attire for all team events (Lane, 2007, p. 78). The NBA also revisited its long-dormant rule that shorts cannot extend .01 inches below the knee (Sheridan, 2005). As is the case with the NFL, the NBA’s rules inherently and intentionally penalize a majority of its Black players. Also, as is the case in the NFL, many players openly rebelled against these new regulations, particularly Denver Nuggets point guard Allen Iverson who is partially responsible for their creation. Iverson, who later acquiesced to the dress code stated, “I really do have a problem with it . . . It’s just not right. It’s something I’ll fight for” (Proposed Dress Code, 2005). Others such as Boston Celtics star forward Paul Pierce joined in, “I dress how I feel anyway . . . I think I’m just going to continue to dress how I feel. I think there’s some days I may take a fine” (Pacers’ Jackson, 2005).

These NBA and the NFL sanctions are the most recent in a series of power-plays between White managerial forces and Black athletes. In essence, both leagues are practicing damage control, trying to exert authority over their players after a prolonged period in which several of their players, the majority of whom are Black, have been involved in incidents that have drawn heavy criticism and withdrawal of support. However, Black players continue to contest authority usually through an adherence to hip-hop and street culture.

The Black Athletic Criminal: The Roots of the Problem

Over the course of the past two decades, the image of the Black athlete has been tarnished. Many high profile crimes involving Black athletes have many sports fans and critics questioning or outright withdrawing their support from professional sports. The number and types of crimes involving Black professional sports figures are quite lengthy, running the gamut from drug trafficking, dog fighting, rape, gunplay, and even murder. This has resulted in a fusion of the Black athlete with the Black criminal. John Hoberman (1997) posits as much in Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race:
The extensive publicity accorded to black athletes in recent decades has played a significant role in public thinking about race and crime by merging the black athlete and the black criminal into a single threatening figure in two ways: first, by dramatizing two physically black male types [the highly physicalized criminal type and the infantile, conspicuous type] that are often presumed to be both culturally and biologically deviant; and second, by putting the violent or otherwise deviant social behavior of black athletes on constant public display so as to reinforce the idea of the black male’s characterological instability. (p. 208)

This view of the Black athletic criminal, which Hoberman finds is a time-honored tradition stretching from postantebellum pseudoscience to the present, is seemingly justified by the frequency, nature, and publicity of their crimes. As Abby Ferber (2007) suggests,

The disproportionate media coverage focused on violent or sexual assault charges brought against Black male athletes, compared with similar charges against White male athletes, reifies this stereotype of Black men as inherently dangerous and in need of civilizing. The message is that all Black men are essentially bad boys but that some can become “good guys” if tamed and controlled by White men. (pp. 20-21)

This dichotomy has had deleterious effects for Black athletes:

This division . . . reflects the historical and ongoing construction of Black masculinity in White supremacist culture and limits the ways in which Black men are seen in our culture. It reinforces the old presumption . . . that Black men are safe and acceptable only when under the control and civilizing influence of Whites. (pp. 21-22)

Coupled with these views of Black athletic criminality, a seemingly unbridgeable cultural divide exists between Black athletes and league administrators. Wayne Embry (2004), the NBA’s first Black general manager, highlighted this division in The Inside Game: Race, Power, and Politics in the NBA. According to Embry, a deep fissure formed between Black athletes and administrators after Latrell Sprewell, a guard for the Golden State Warriors, choked Warriors coach P. J. Carlesimo after a heated altercation. For many, the incident that resulted in a year-long suspension for Sprewell, served as a clear indication that Black athletes were “out of control”. Furthermore, it pointed to what Embry had surmised years earlier:

The lack of trust between the players and owners was a reflection of the social and cultural changes in The League and in society in general. [By the 1995-1996 season] The League’s players were 93% black. Most of the players came from urban environments and urban schools where the faculties and student bodies were predominantly black. Owners and general managers and most of the coaches came from an entirely different background, and I would contend that the only contact that most of them had with black people was through The League. This meant there was a fundamental lack of communication and understanding between races and classes. No wonder there was no trust. (p. 411)
For Sarah Benet-Weiser (1999), this conflict has been to the detriment of the Black athlete: “When class politics do become visible, they work in favor of working-class White men—the ‘blue collar hero’—but against Black athletes, who are seen as incapable of assimilating to the standards and practices of the middle class” (p. 408). The Black athlete’s inability to assimilate thus serves as a rationale for disuse. Benet-Weiser suggests,

The underlying narrative here is that U.S. sports organizations should not give young Black players money and opportunity that would improve their class and social status, because that would put these unfortunate players in a social and economic position that they are simply not capable of negotiating. (p. 408)

The locus for this conflict is hip-hop and street culture. As the NBA and NFL continue to draw from a talent pool in which many of its members fully embrace these cultures and lifestyles, both leagues find they have to deal with the aftereffects. The NBA, in particular, has found it rather difficult to negotiate with its players “incestuous relationship” with hip-hop. Lane (2007) wrote of this relationship:

A typical hip-hop video features a rap star outfitted in contemporary or vintage NBA gear—jersey, warm-ups, headband—boasting of a distinguished drug-dealing past and a penchant for smoking marijuana. Sometimes basketball stars even make cameos: Los Angeles Lakers forward Lamar Odom, who has violated the NBA's drug policy, dances nonchalantly in rapper Jadakiss’s “Knock Yourself Out.” In rapper Mike Jones’s 2005 hit video for “Flossin”, fellow Houston luminary and Rockets star guard Tracy McGrady leans against an expensive car, checking out the girls in the neighborhood and approvingly flashing Jones a peace sign. Chris Webber and Allen Iverson, Philadelphia 76ers teammates and two of basketball’s biggest names, have each recorded rap albums and each has been arrested for marijuana possession. (p. 3)

Lane (2007) contended that the corporate and middle class conceptions of hip-hop culture were based on media representations rather than direct interaction with players:

Listening to Black music, watching Black athletes on television, and seeing Black criminals on the news functions in lieu of direct communication. Because each of these forums is a space removed from everyday life . . . a transfiguration occurs in which Blacks become characters, icons, symbols, or caricatures—that is, something other than human beings. (p. 66)

As such, hip-hop and street culture become easy scapegoats for many of the league’s woes and has been implicated in events such as the 2004 Olympic basketball team’s disastrous play to the infamous brawl between players and fans during a Detroit Pistons–Indiana Pacers game at the Palace of Auburn Hills.

The NBA has not suffered hip-hop and street culture alone. Many regard the NFL as a hotbed of gang and hip-hop culture, especially given the number of NFL players
who have faced jail sentences on gun-related charges or, as is the case with Washington Redskins safety Shawn Taylor or Denver Broncos cornerback Darrent Williams, have been killed by gun violence. Conservative critics such as Rush Limbaugh (2007) and Jason Whitlock (2007) frequently lambasted the league for its continued “tolerance” of unruly players and note the decline of sportsmanship. Limbaugh chastised the NFL as a “classless culture”:

Then we get Joe Horn of the [New Orleans] Saints after he scored a touchdown pulling a cell phone out of his socks and faked making a phone call. Well, guess what shows up on ESPN? So these guys get validated, everybody wants to stand out, they want to get endorsement deals and so forth. So television, making stars out of people who engage in classless behavior helps lead to it and contribute to it. No question in my mind about it. . . . The NFL all too often looks like a game between the Bloods and the Crips without any weapons. (Limbaugh, 2007)

Whitlock (2007) concurred,

African-American football players caught up in the rebellion and buffoonery of hip hop culture have given NFL owners and coaches a justifiable reason to whiten their rosters. That will be the legacy left by Chad, Larry and Tank Johnson, Pacman Jones, Terrell Owens, Michael Vick and all the other football bojanglers.

Of the players mentioned, two—Terry “Tank” Johnson and Adam “Pacman” Jones—have been suspended for highly publicized gunfight incidents at nightclubs and have had several run-ins with the police in their relatively short professional careers. Chad Johnson, Larry Johnson, and Terrell Owens are most noted for either violating league mandates or defying their coaches. Critics find it of no surprise that some of these players, Jones and the deceased Williams, also recorded or produced hip-hop on their private record labels as have several NBA performers, including Ron Artest and Allen Iverson, who drew much criticism for a single that contained homophobic, misogynistic, and violent content.

The seemingly increasing number of criminalized, noncompliant, hip-hop-affiliated Black athletes has yet to translate into disinterest from the fans. In fact, both the NBA and the NFL had highlight years in attendance during their 2006-2007 seasons. However, the polishing of their tarnished image and the potential loss of fans, particularly the most affluent ones, remain the foremost concerns of both leagues. Perhaps no sign is more telling of the identity politics in professional sports than recent NBA marketing strategies. Lane (2007) noted

By using a brand [Reebok commercials featuring actor Fred Willard] articulated by a nearly seventy-year-old white man and not by someone like Chris Rock, who had done NBA spots before, the NBA . . . redirected its focus. The campaign was aimed at two important, primarily white, constituencies: turned-off middle-aged or older middle-class fans and the affluent businessmen in the corporate seats. Because the bulk of the
NBA’s revenue comes from selling seats and these two groups could afford to buy seats, they were essential customers . . . The NBA later hired Matthew Dowd, a campaign adviser for George Bush’s 2004 election run, to help attract new customers and address declining television ratings and merchandise sales . . . What better way to lighten up the mood and galvanize dubious white fans than [country music performers Big & Rich, who performed at the 2005 NBA All-Star Game] non-black comedy, and Matthew Dowd? (pp. 74-75)

The move to host a more conservative All-Star Game—which, in the past, had featured hip-hop acts such as Sean “Diddy” Combs, Fabolous, Lil’ Bow Wow, Outkast, etc.—is of little surprise when one considers that just the year before the NFL faced a scandal of its own when pop singer Janet Jackson accidentally revealed her breast during the Super Bowl XXXVIII halftime performance. Since then, both the Super Bowl and the NBA All-Star Game have featured more conservative performers.2 However, no sign of the leagues’ desires to play it safe has been more fervent than the NBA and the NFL’s tougher guidelines on appearance and sportsmanship.

**Damage Control: Policing Black Bodies**

Both the NBA and NFL have adopted rather stringent guidelines regarding appearance and sportsmanship. Although these regulations are certainly applicable to all, they are targeted towards Black athletes as these rules attempt to counter many of the aspects Black athletes have brought to sports. Most of the rules stipulate uniformity and attempt to make Black athletes’ appearance as palatable as possible for the middle and upper middle class ranks that fill league coffers.

Lane provides details of the NBA’s 2005 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA):

The NBA announced a dress code effective at the start of the 2005-2006 season . . . The dress code required that players wear business casual clothing for all team and league functions, including press conferences and interviews, promotional events, and the arrival and departure from games. “Business casual” in this instance meant a collared dress shirt, turtleneck, or sweater, accompanied by khakis, slacks, or dress jeans. Approved footwear included dress shoes, dress boots, or “other presentable” shoes. Players attending games but not in uniform had to add a sports coat to the outfit. More significant than what players must wear were items that were no longer permissible: jerseys, all headgear (i.e. baseball caps, do-rags, bandanas, and headbands), sunglasses indoors, sneakers, construction or casual boots, and chains and pendants (pp. 78-79).

The CBA also contained a proviso that altered the league’s age requirement. American players now have to wait one year after high school graduation before they can become draft eligible whereas they were previously draft eligible on graduation (“No Lockout”, 2005). According to David Leonard (2006), the purpose of the age restriction was clear:
In numerous interviews regarding the proposed age restriction, David Stern did not even deny the importance of the proposed rule change in winning back fans, arguing that the league’s motivation emanated from business concerns, their effort to placate fan concerns, and the increasing discomfort of many NBA executives with scouting teenagers. (p. 170)

The league also renewed its focus on the length of shorts. For a number of years, players wore longer length shorts, a trend actually initiated by Michael Jordan. After some initial contestation, loose-fitting shorts became the norm and went virtually without notice during Jordan’s tenure in the NBA, from 1984 through 2003. However, with the arrival of Allen Iverson and the new guard of NBA players, shorts lengths increased. In 2005, the league began reenforcing the 0.1 inch above the knee rule, which resulted in several players, including Iverson and some of his Philadelphia 76ers teammates, being fined US$10,000. Also the players’ teams were also fined US$50,000 for the offense (Sheridan, 2005).

Although not a part of the CBA, another oft-ignored rule began to be reenforced in the 2005 season: Referees began focusing on calling traveling, which involves the player palming, or placing his hand underneath the ball while dribbling instead of the standard overhand dribble. On the surface, this seems rather innocuous; however, palming is essential in the crossover dribble, an elaborate maneuver utilized frequently in streetball. Allen Iverson’s highlight reel crossover dribble on Michael Jordan is long considered the moment that ushered in a new era in basketball. Coincidentally, palming fouls were called inconsistently during the Jordan era, mostly in part because Jordan himself was often guilty of palming the ball. However, focusing on the crossover dribble is a step to remove the last vestiges of streetball from the professional game.

The NFL heavily enforces players’ on-field appearance. Most of the infractions are relatively minor—fines for loose chinstraps, socks worn too high or too low, and so on. However, the NFL’s league competition committee did target stocking caps and bandanas, both of which are typically worn by Black athletes. CBS Sportsline senior writer Pete Prisco (2001) asserts, “The head covers are not viewed as professional looking, and the recommendation would return the league to a uniform code of dress” (2001). The NFL also has penalized players for wearing any item that somehow distinguishes them. For example, in 2005, the league fined Washington Redskins running back US$20,000 for wearing an unauthorized tinted eye shield, burgundy socks, and black shoes. The NFL also fines athletes who wear endorsed apparel if that apparel is not within NFL marketing partnerships. For example, the NFL fined New Orleans running back Reggie Bush US$10,000 for wearing Adidas cleats because it only permits either Nike or Reebok.

The NFL made its strongest ruling during the owners’ meetings in 2005. With a majority vote of 29-3, the owners voted to penalize “excessive celebrations” after touchdowns with a 15-yard penalty on the ensuing kickoff for the team (Clayton, 2005). The owners also banned any celebrations that involved a player lying or
kneeling on the ground or using props (Battista, 2006). Although the NFL has long had rules on taunting, those rules did not prohibit touchdown celebrations unless they involved taunting.

Any flagrant acts or remarks that deride, mock, bait or embarrass an opponent are considered taunting. This includes, but is not limited to, spiking the football near a defender after a touchdown, shoving the ball at an opponent, or repeated finger-pointing . . . Player demonstrations (e.g., end-zone dances) are not fouls under N.F.L. playing rules and will not result in penalties by the game officials. However, if a demonstration constitutes taunting . . . or if it is unsportsmanlike conduct or delays the game, a foul will be called (The NFL View on Taunting, 1994).

Not all touchdown celebrations are prohibited “Spikes, dunks, Lambeau Leaps, spins, dances and simple celebrations will be allowed. But penalties will be given for any celebration other than that” (Clayton 2005). 3

Undue Attention: Problematizing Appearance and Sportsmanship Guidelines

Although the intent of these stiffer regulations is clear, their effectiveness is, at best, dubious and their application, in many cases, is inconsistent and simply unjust. Herbert D. Simons (2003) isolates the problematic nature of these new penalties:

The penalties are applied in an inconsistent manner, are peripheral to the competition and are punished more harshly. In addition, the sportsmanship code is difficult to apply and interpret. Second, the amount of attention these sanctioned behaviors receive is out of proportion to their importance to the competition. This undue attention reflects more than a concern for sportsmanship . . . The penalties are an example of institutionalized racism and White mainstream males' assertion of their right to interpret and control African American behavior. (pp. 5-6)

Simons (2003) noted that the “same or similar behaviors are punished in one sport but not in others and superficially dissimilar, but deeply analogous behaviors by athletes of different races receive different interpretations and different sanctions.” To solidify his point, Simons compares the behaviors exhibited in professional sports played by predominantly White athletes—such as jubilant celebrations in soccer and fighting in hockey—that are not penalized (p. 6). However, one need only look to the NBA and NFL:

A few weeks before Sprewell choked Carlesimo, Tom Chambers, a white forward on the Phoenix Suns, punched his assistant coach . . . No suspensions were handed down . . . Furthermore, in an incident in the NFL that appeared on national television, Kevin Steele, the linebacker coach of the Carolina Panthers, confronted Kevin Greene after the
player had botched a play. Greene, who is white, first told his superior to get lost and then grabbed the coach by the collar and threatened him before teammates intervened. Greene’s punishment was a one-game suspension (costing him US$118,000; p. 94).

Incidents such as these are indicative of a double standard based on race. The heaviest penalties are usually enacted on Black athletes, particularly whenever the leagues wish to send a message that their authority is intact and not to be questioned.

Simons (2003) focused on two primary problems with these new regulations: (a) They are a result of “undue attention” and (b) They emerge from a White hegemonic concept of sportsmanship. Of this undue attention, he writes

The penalization of the sports behaviors under discussion passes the undue attention test, since the amount of attention they receive is disproportionate to their importance to the game itself. The unspoken basis for contestation is race, fear of erosion of White athletic dominance and the loss of power to control and interpret behavior. The behaviors present a challenge by a subordinate group (African American males) to the understanding of the verbal and non-verbal behavior that the dominant group has defined as good sportsmanship. (p. 9)

Simons’ (2003) findings are substantiated if one considers these recent additions and changes to NBA and NFL regulations. Most of these regulations are cosmetic with the intent of fostering good public relations between management and the middle class ticketholders and business class patrons who purchase skybox seats. Of those rules that deal directly with gameplay—most notably the NBA’s renewed interest in calling palming violations and the NFL’s penalization of elaborate touchdown celebrations—they are either called so inconsistently that the rule’s existence seems wholly unjustified or they facetiously distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not. For instance, as Larry Platt (2002) noted about Allen Iverson

But [in 1996, Iverson’s rookie year] he also led the league in turnovers, committing 5.3 a game. Part of the high turnover rate was attributable to unprecedented attention from the referees . . . At this point, Iverson was clearly the impetus behind a league memo that called for a crackdown not only on Iverson’s type of long, droopy shorts, but also on his style of dribbling. In truth, his crossover dribble did flirt with being a carry; the word went forth that the refs would be calling palming more often. Iverson’s high hesitation dribble was suddenly being called illegal, sometimes two or three times a game. (p. 112)

As Platt (2002) suggests, a thin line already existed between the legal high hesitation dribble and the illegal palming, and palming was infrequently called prior to Iverson’s debut in the league. The sudden enforcement of palming violations not only reveals the inconsistencies of the violation but also indicates a clear bias toward the hip-hop athlete, especially when one considers that Michael Jordan made palming a regular part of his repertoire. Dwight Jaynes (2007) said it best: “Palming the
ball? That’s a turnover. Sometimes—depending on who did it. They’ve gotten more strict about calling traveling. Some games. Sometimes. Some players. Not others”.

These new rules are also oftentimes frivolous, particularly the NFL’s punishment of touchdown celebrations. Most of the celebrations do not violate any of the previous rules regarding touchdown celebrations. For example, many of the celebrations do not involve taunting the opponent. However, therein lies part of the problem: The NFL’s definition of taunting is vague and contradictory. By suggesting that it “includes, but is not limited to, spiking the football near a defender after a touchdown, shoving the ball at an opponent, or repeated finger-pointing”, the NFL opens the door to rather liberal interpretation. As Simons (2003) noted

[S]ome of the unsportsmanlike conduct rules are less specific than the competitive advantage rules, which describe precisely and in more detail the prohibited behaviors (e.g., offside and holding in football, fouling in basketball)… The vagueness of the unsportsmanlike conduct rules requires the redefining of the prohibited behaviors almost every year. As new behaviors appear, new rules have to be made which appear to have little rhyme or reason. (p. 8)

Such is the case with the touchdown celebration penalties, which were initially defined in 1994. One might argue that laws do require some form of adaptability to deal with new situations; after all, elaborate touchdown celebrations are a relatively new phenomena and are a far cry from their precursor Billy “Whiteshoes” Johnson’s “funky chicken” dances of the early 1980s. Nonetheless, these new amendments focus on rather trivial aspects of these celebrations. No explanation is given for what makes leaping over a fan barrier into the first row of fans acceptable but using a prop unacceptable. Both instances draw attention to the individual, which seems to be the impetus for the penalty in the first place. All things considered, penalizing and fining a player who celebrates a touchdown by donning a gold blazer seems foolhardy, particularly when one considers the potential harm of the permitted Lambeau Leap, wherein a 200-plus pound athlete clad in full football paraphernalia leaps at the fans.

Inconsistencies and inequities are symptomatic of what is perhaps the overarching problem: Sportsmanship in major league sports is based on a purely White hegemonic ideal. Though Black athletes comprise the overwhelming majority of players in both leagues—currently nearly 75% in the NBA and nearly 70% in the NFL—their cultural backgrounds are of little consequence in determining what constitutes appropriate levels of sportsmanship, save for when the league is determining what is not permissible. Thus one is led to reach the same conclusions as Annelies Knoppers and Anton Anthonissen (2005): “[W]hite managerial masculinities are often more valued than are Black masculinities. Obviously various masculinities tend to be privileged over others and shape dominant managerial discourses and practices” (p. 128). Knoppers and Anthonissen categorize the different ways in which managerial and
athletic discourses intersect (a) authoritarianism in which there is absolute rule with little room for dissent; (b) paternalism in which there is an emphasis on cooperation based on moral grounds yet a fundamental need for final decisions to rest with one authority; (c) entrepreneurialism in which sports are emphasized as a means in which to draw other clients; (d) informalism in which a network is created wherein its participants share values and interests; and (e) careerism, which emphasizes hierarchical advancement and aggressiveness (pp. 128-131).

From this discourse emerges a White hegemonic concept of sportsmanship to which Black athletes must adhere. However, the flaws in this concept are obvious even before one considers the fact that the concept does not take Black cultural practices into consideration. Simons (2003) contended that the American concept of sportsmanship was based off of an antiquated, British elitist pretext meant to “civilize” the lower classes. He lists among its qualities fair play, honesty, humility, respect for one’s opponents, and a lack of individuality. However, as Simons suggested, their definitions were so “culturally relative” and clearly at odds with those who comprise the majority of the NBA and NFL’s talent base (pp. 8-9). Furthermore, applying a dated notion intended for unpaid, amateur athletics to paid, professional sports seems contradictory, especially when one considers how much leagues reward individual efforts through incentive clauses in contracts and capitalize off of the individual both on and off the field. For example, both leagues market both the team and the individual to the masses; whenever a jersey sells, for instance, it not only carries the league and team logo but also features the more popular players’ names. Apparently, individuality is only sufficient when it is on the leagues’ terms and to their sole benefit.

Given the cultural relativity of this sportsmanship ideal, it should be of little surprise that it is at odds with the notion of sportsmanship held by many Black athletes. For Black athletes, sport is a form of entertainment, and the athlete is the entertainer. Thus all of the theatricalities that Black athletes bring to sport—the highlight reel dunks, the choreographed dance moves after scoring, the trash talk—are endemic of a Black sportsmanship aesthetic that emphasizes individuality and performance. Many researchers attribute this to Richard Majors and Janet Billson’s (1991) theory of the “cool pose,” which they describe as “the construction of unique, expressive, and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, clothing, hair styles, walk, stance and handshake”, which itself is part of the expressive individualism inherent in Black American culture (p. 111). This manifests itself in sports in displays such as “celebrating, dancing, high stepping, spiking, dunking, taking off one’s helmet” and verbal sparring in the form of trash talk (Simons, 2003, p. 12). As Bengals receiver Chad Johnson suggests, cool pose is innate: “What you see on the field… is all Miami. My swagger, the way I talk, the way I play. It’s part of your upbringing there. When you’re 4 years old, you’re talking trash on the field. Seriously—it’s an art form down there.” (Penn, 2007, p. 176). This view of sports has led to the contestation between league officials and Black athletes:
The difference in the way African Americans and whites approach basketball, football, and other competitive sports accounts for these confrontations [over showboating]. Whites view competitive sports exclusively in terms of winning and losing. African Americans view competitive sports in terms of dominating the field, being the best and performing in a show. To whites, showboating within a game is directed only against one’s opponent rather than, as African Americans intend it, toward the crowd in the stands (Simons, 2003, p. 12).

This outlook proves problematic for both leagues as, from their purviews, it reflects poor sportsmanship and may ultimately lead to physical confrontation. However, as Simons (2003) proves, there is little rationale for this belief. The style and bravado inherent in Black athletic performance rarely brings about conflict as they are inherent, understood, and accepted parts of the game; what brings about most conflict is harsh or unnecessary physical contact: “The fear that trash talking will lead to violence is out of proportion to the actual threat . . . Physical play and hard fouls are more likely to be responsible for fighting than trash talking” (Simons, 2003, pp. 13-14). Given the frequency of fighting and rioting in predominantly White sports such as soccer and hockey and the relative infrequency in the NBA and NFL, the obvious is made clear: League administrators do not fear violence; they fear Blacks breaking White-imposed law.

From this fear of “out-of-control” Black bodies emerges the justification for regulations such as a dress code and age limits. The brawl at the Palace of Auburn Hills, which David Leonard (2006) labels as “an extraordinary fight” largely because massive fighting is indeed a rarity in the NBA, and hip-hop culture have served as the just cause for stricter guidelines:

The fact that Ron Artest attacked those “poor” (White) fans in Detroit and others responded with aggression was not surprising given the presence of hip-hop within the league. At least, that is what media pundits concluded again and again. Having diagnosed the problem and seen the consequences of this “marriage,” commentators lamented the needed steps to redeem and ultimately retake the game of basketball . . . In the months following the brawl, it became increasingly clear that [NBA Commissioner] David Stern was listening, with a year-long suspension of Artest, several shorter suspensions, a proposed age limit of 20 for the league, and other “needed” rule changes (a dress code and an increased fine structure for technical fouls; p. 161).

Lane (2007) agreed,

To avoid implicating itself and to handle what’s considered an image problem at the surface level, the NBA has placed more controls on the players—both those already in the league and those entering the league in the future. The controls affect how the players look, how old rookies must be, the sorts of contracts players can sign, and the substances they can put into their bodies. (p. 110)
However, this focus on appearance and age has two primary flaws: First, neither rule addresses nor has any real effect on gameplay; and second, these rules—amongst others—are distractions from other more crucial issues that loom largely over the entirety of sport.

A number of events threaten the NBA and the NFL’s integrity more so than baggy shorts and outlandish endzone celebrations. The use of steroids, human growth hormones (HGH), and other illegal enhancements have managed to taint sports in general. Although steroids have not been much of an issue in the NBA, a sport where bulk is usually admonished, they have been in others, particularly the NFL and Major League Baseball (MLB), where players routinely violate prohibitions on performance enhancement drugs. The problem has been such a pandemic that the House of Representatives once threatened legislation that would permit it to oversee the testing for steroids and other enhancement as the House’s belief was that “the stakes are too high—and the problems too entrenched—to allow even well-intentioned leagues to handle the sports ‘cheating’ issue themselves” (Barker, 2005).

Although the NBA has yet to deal with the performance drug issue, it has had to deal with other issues that threaten its integrity, namely the federal investigation into a gambling scandal involving referee Tim Donaghy. Donaghy has admitted to wagering on games that he has officiated over the course of 4 years and tipping off gamblers on which teams to bet. However, NBA Commissioner Stern has tread lightly on the matter; J. A. Adande (2007) remarked,

> With no less than the credibility of the sport at stake, NBA commissioner David Stern appears resistant to radical transformations . . . Stern, in his first extended comments since the early days of the scandal, sounded resistant to making officials more accessible or publicizing the league’s evaluations of them, two steps that would help.”

In other words, Stern has not reacted as swiftly and harshly as he did in the aftermath of the Palace brawl, which seems odd especially given that combating point-shaving has long been a concern of the league.

When all is tallied, these new legislations seem wholly inappropriate in that they really do not address matters of major consequence. These cosmetic changes to the game indicate the leagues’ desires not only to appear in control of its legions of Black athletes but also to appear in control of its operations in light of other scandals of which drugs and gambling are only two of many that have arisen. Black athletes certainly make for great competitors, but for the NBA and NFL, they also serve as even better scapegoats and distractions.

**Black Athletic Acts of Defiance**

Dick Hebdige’s (2002) work on subculture’s contestation of hegemony through style serves as a blueprint for the conflict between Black athletes and White managerial
practices. In his seminal text, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, he posits, “[T]he challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed . . . at the level of signs” (p. 17). Though Hebdige’s focus is on youth subcultures, particularly punk rock, it is applicable here: In the NBA and NFL, style is manifested through Black athletes’ adherence to hip-hop and street culture.

As Hebdige (2002) suggested, subcultures use style to draw attention to contradictions in hegemonic discourse. One can see this evidenced in recent touchdown celebrations, which have evolved from simple dances to heavily choreographed performances to commentary. Take for instance Terrell Owens’s September 2007 endzone celebration. After scoring a touchdown against the Miami Dolphins, Owens went behind the goalpost and pantomimed a rolling camera, a jab at the NFL’s most recent scandal in which New England Patriots’ coach Bill Belichick was fined for videotaping the New York Jets defensive signals earlier that month. Belichick subsequently was fined the league maximum of US$500,000, and the Patriots organization was fined US$250,000 and the loss of the team’s first round draft pick in 2008. Although these are certainly substantial penalties, one glaring issue remains: Belichick was not suspended. In fact, despite damaging team and league credibility and calling into question the team’s Super Bowl victories, Belichick actually received a long-term contract extension (Smith, 2007). Contrast this with Owens’s career in which he was once suspended for four games, deactivated for the remainder of the 2005-2006 season, and subsequently released by the Philadelphia Eagles for criticizing Eagles management and team quarterback Donovan McNabb, and the contradictions in hegemonic discourse become quite obvious. Owens’s celebrations—along with his snide remark afterwards of “I hope they don’t give me a hefty fine like they gave Belichick”—call attention to these inequities and point out the frivolity of penalizing touchdown celebrations in light of more pressing concerns (McMahon, 2007). Furthermore, Owens’s celebration pointed out the inconsistencies in fining touchdown celebrations, for Owens was fined US$7,500 for this celebration despite not using a prop.⁴

Though the NBA and the NFL have been able to regulate clothing, they have not been able to regulate other aspects of Black athletes’ appearance, namely, hair and skin. Through cornrows, dreadlocks, and tattoos, clear markers of Black hip-hop and street culture, many Black athletes retain what they consider authenticity though they may be clad in business casual garb. Beginning with the queered, heavily tattooed appearance of Dennis Rodman in the late 1990s, Black athletes have managed to contest the total commodification of their bodies for middle- and upper-class fans. As evidence, Lane offers the difficulties Allen Iverson’s cornrows and tattoos present these fans:

For the displeased followers of the sport, Iverson was difficult to swallow if not totally unpalatable . . . A replication of Iverson’s tattooed body—now inked more than twenty times over, with messages paying tribute to (among others) his deceased friends and old neighborhood—is similarly not feasible for the average White male fan. Copying Iverson’s look was more difficult than buying or stealing the right hip-hop clothing; it
couldn’t be pulled off. For lusting White fans, this was another sobering reminder of the separation between them and Iverson. As they had realized in the case of hard-core rappers with real rap sheets and ‘thug life’ tattoos, black ghetto living could never be experienced hands-on but could only be romanticized from a distance. (pp. 41-42)

In fact, Iverson’s tattoos proved so problematic to the league’s image that it tried to conceal them. In the December 1999 issue of *Hoop*, the NBA’s official magazine, Iverson’s diamond earring and some of his tattoos were digitally removed while text was layered over remaining tattoos (Lane, p. 51). That tattoos and cornrows have become more normalized in the NBA is not solely a result of Black athletes’ desire to remain trendy; they also emerge from out of a very real desire to shape an identity and retain authenticity in light of the leagues’ desires to make them fit for consumption.

Hebdige (2002) describes the process in which subcultures are eventually incorporated by the empowered: (a) in commodity form—the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, etc.) into mass-produced objects, and (b) in ideological form—the normalization of the Other or the transformation of the Other into “meaningless exotica” (pp. 94-96). In an effort to stave off the ever-looming threat of hip-hop and street culture, both the NBA and the NFL followed Hebdige’s cues to the letter. This is evident in the NBA’s tumultuous wedding with hip-hop during the 1990s, when the NBA unabashedly utilized hip-hop to market its product. As Lane noted,

Uniform designs, team logos, and colors became louder, bigger, brighter, and glossier mirroring the cut and hues of hip-hop clothing . . . The NBA began licensing hip-hop themed products, most famously video games like *NBA Jam* and its sequels and spin-offs. (pp. 40-41)

However, perhaps more telling of the NBA’s union with hip-hop is *Basketball’s Best Kept Secret*, a compilation CD released in November 1994 that featured basketball superstars such as Jason Kidd and Shaquille O’Neal—who has had a modestly successful rap career. Although the CD was not an overwhelming success nor officially sanctioned by the NBA, it was nonetheless featured on NBA programming such as *NBA Inside Stuff*. Compared to the brand of hip-hop culture Iverson would later bring to the league, *Basketball’s Best Kept Secret* is light, inoffensive fluff. Nonetheless, it—and the various other products the NBA either created or endorsed—showed the NBA’s initial willingness to co-opt and capitalize off hip-hop.

However, as is evident by the NBA’s staunch campaign to rid itself of hip-hop and street culture’s influence, hip-hop is not so easily commodified. As columnist Bryant Burwell suggested, the NBA had been sold a false bill of goods:

[The NBA] thought [it was] getting [pop rap artists] Will Smith and LL Cool J. But now [it has] discovered the dark side of hip-hop has also infiltrated [the] game, with its “bling-bling” ostentation, its unrepentant I-gotta-get-paid ruthlessness, its unregulated culture of posses, and the constant underlying threat of violence. (Burwell, 2004)
What Burwell and other critics saw as “the dark side of hip-hop”, Russell Potter (2007) saw as a hip-hop’s natural aversion to mainstream appropriation. Potter stated, “[T]his commodification frequently backfires, transvalued before it even reaches the streets” (p. 459). For the Black athlete, sport—like hip-hop—is a venue for staging “the difference of blackness”:

[T]he insurrectionary aspect of [staging blackness] has been that it has forced Euro-American culture to take stock of its own costumes, lingo, and poses—that is, to see ‘whiteness’ as a quality . . . The logic of the ‘same’—of the white, middle-class world as a norm which never has to account for itself—is called violently into question by the Signification has never been played as far to (and beyond) the limit as it has been by hip-hop culture. (p. 468)

Although Hedbige envisions a cyclical relationship between subculture and industry in which the subculture creates new trends only to see them eventually appropriated, hip-hop and street culture undoubtedly have proven exceptions to the rule (p. 95). Neither league wants any part of hip-hop or street culture, for it cannot be controlled, and, apparently, it can be contained only temporarily.

Who’s Got Next? Black Athletes’ Future in the NBA and NFL

Wayne Embry’s (2004) musings on the widening gap between league officials and Black athletes is a telltale sign of what is to come. He tells of a league meeting following the Sprewell-Carlesimo incident that speaks volumes about the hostile relationship between players and administration:

[I asked] ‘Would it be worthwhile to invite a social scientist to our meetings to give us a refresher course in sociology, so that we can better manage our product, which is our players?’ . . . My thinking was that to manage anyone you had to understand where they came from and what they had been through. That was the theory behind all the diversity and sensitivity training sessions that were becoming mandatory in the business world. I thought that if the NBA sponsored the sessions, rather than the individual teams, all of us would benefit from the same message. The response was a cold one. ‘That is not appropriate for these meetings,’ the commissioner said. End of conversation. (pp. 394-395)

In other words, not only did NBA executives fail to understand the culture of its players, but also they were unwilling to learn to understand. The authoritarianism inherent in White masculine managerial discourse compels league officials to be sole disseminators of law and the final voice on all matters. To these executives, Black cultural practices are irrelevant despite the presence of a predominantly Black talent base.

Thus Jason Whitlock’s (2007) predictions of the gradual disuse of the Black athlete seem apropos. One need only look at the declining presence of Black athletes in
MLB to see Whitlock’s prophecy at work. A decade ago, Blacks comprised nearly 17% of MLB; that number as of April 2007 is 8.4%, which includes foreign born Hispanics who self-identify as Black. As CNN’s Chris Isidore suggests, among other factors including Black disinterest in baseball, Black players are the victim of economics—both their own socioeconomic backgrounds and the economics of scouting and player development. Scouting overseas is more economically efficient than courting Black American athletes; therefore, MLB has spent the last couple of decades courting players from the Dominican Republic, Japan, Korea, and various other locales in lieu of scouting and developing Black American players, who often lack access to baseball fields and other youth baseball programs (Isidore, 2007).

MLB—second only to the National Hockey League, which is about 3% Black—has been ahead of the curve in terms of globalization, having already developed a rather extensive foreign talent base. The NFL has fared relatively well overseas, having run NFL Europa for 16 years prior to ceasing operations in 2007; however, although it has done much for developing an international fan base, developing a foreign talent base still eludes it. However, the NBA has been successful in the global market, now drawing players primarily from Europe. As Lane (2007) noted, this may have deleterious effects for Black athletes:

In certain respects, handling hip-hop has gotten easier for the NBA over the last five years. The influx of foreign players (who are mostly white and from Europe) has provided a balance in the look and style of play. Globalization has made the domestic marketing of hip-hop ballplayers less important. (p. 66)

Courting European players can pay dividends for the NBA, for not only will it dilute and eventually dispel the hip-hip and street culture rampant in the league today, but also it will give the White fan base that for which it has clamored a Whiter NBA. Extensive studies of Nielsen ratings conducted by Mark T. Kanazawa and Jonas P. Funk (2001) reveals a stark reality:

All else equal, more fans tune in when there are more white players to watch, even when they are sitting on the bench. Indeed, the mere presence of white players on team rosters seems to have a more significant effect on Nielsen ratings than the numbers of minutes white players actually play. (p. 607)

Thus, fielding a Whiter team is ultimately in the NBA’s financial best interests. Kanazawa and Funk (2001) stated,

To the extent that viewers tune in more heavily to watch Whiter teams, teams may be able to increase their commercial revenues by fielding more White players. NBA teams may well consider this possibility, because the NBA earns about as much from media revenues as it does from attendance at games. (p. 605)
However, Blacks themselves may be doing most of the grunt work of removing hip-hop and street culture from the leagues. With Black murder rates and Black imprisonment increasing, there are very real concerns about whether there will be much of a talent base from which to draw in the not-so-distant future. Harry Edwards (2003), who has long been critical of Black participation in professional sports, sees the absence of the Black athlete as a foregone conclusion:

Through societal processes, through institutional erosion, through the degradation of the black athletic pool, through disqualification, judicial procedures and deaths, we have so emaciated the black talent pool that we are beginning to see a drop-off in performance at every level, in all sports where blacks participate in numbers. We are simply disqualifying, jailing, burying, and leaving behind our black athletes . . . Now we are seeing a precipitous drop-off, and the reasons are not inside sport; the reasons are in society, which are ultimately reflected in sport. (p. 438)

For Edwards (2003), the connection between Black athletes is both palpable and troubling. He compares Black athletes to their gangland counterparts:

They both have numbers; they are both in uniforms, and they both belong to gangs. Only they call one the Crips or the Bloods, while they call the other the 49ers, Warriors, Athletics, or the Giants. They are all in pursuit of respect. They all, at one level or another, keep score. The parallels are there. It is the same guy. (p. 439)

For all the doom and gloom forecasted for Black athletes, one fact remains clear: Most intend to continue playing the game on their own terms. Though the threat of removal looms largely overhead, it has not stopped many Black athletes from playing their style of ball or from continuing to challenge authority. Perhaps some refuse to adhere to authority out of stubbornness or immaturity; however, many refuse to kowtow for they are aware of the disparities and inequities present in the NBA and NFL. Detroit Pistons forward Rasheed Wallace (2003) once remarked,

I’m not like a whole bunch of these young boys out here who get caught up and captivated into the league . . . No. I see behind the lines. I see behind the false screens. I know what this business is all about. I know the commissioner of this league makes more than three-quarters of the players in this league.(para 3)

Wallace’s (2003) comments shine a bright light on the league’s power brokers, questioning their ability to fairly treat their players. For his remarks, Wallace was labeled “a chronic underachiever, a malcontent, a disruptive force, a negative personality” (Walton, 2003). However, all things considered, Wallace may not have been far off the mark: Four years after Wallace’s remarks, the leagues’ sense of justice and fairness is still under question, especially considering how both the NBA and NFL have tread lightly on punishing managers, officials, and owners whose actions also threaten the integrity of the game.

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Notes

1. Chad Johnson’s “FUTURE H.O.F. 20??” blazer refers to the golden blazers traditionally worn by NFL Hall of Fame inductees during their induction ceremony.

2. Controversy did arise again at Super Bowl XLI when pop musician Prince, who played his guitar behind a screen of silken sheets, made a gesture that made the guitar appear phallic. However, it should be noted that Prince, formerly known for his more raucous performances, is now a Jehovah’s Witness who no longer performs his more racy material, so many viewers believe that his gesture was unintentional.

3. The Lambeau Leap involves a player leaping over the barrier separating the football field from the first row of fans after he scores a touchdown. The term refers to Lambeau Field, the Green Bay Packers’ stadium, where the celebration originated in 1993.

4. Owens made the camera gesture while maintaining possession of the football. However, the football was incidental to the touchdown celebration itself.

References


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