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Marking the boundaries of the ‘normal’ in televised sports: the play-by-play of race

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Ongoing research into the texts of televised sports demonstrates the resilience of ideologies about race and racial difference. Despite widespread scholarly and popular debate and increased consciousness in the sports media industry, particular ways of understanding racial differences appear to remain firmly embedded in the everyday discourses and practices of televised sports. Although the days of acceptable overt racism appear to be gone, pervasive and historically grounded beliefs about racial difference have not disappeared (e.g. Andrews, 1996; Cottle, 2000; Hall, 1981, 1995; Lule, 1995; McDonald, 1996; Sailes, 1993). Instead they reveal themselves more subtly in, among other things, sports commentary about black athletic superiority and white intellectual superiority, and differential patterns of naming that support existing racial hierarchies.

Twenty-five years of content and textual analyses suggest, as Andrews argues about popular culture more generally, that televised elite male sport promotes ‘stereotypical and divisive, yet common-sense, embodied articulations of race and racial difference’ (1996: 132). Further, in its visual and narrative representations, mediated sport naturalizes the popular fascination with and common-sense acceptance of black athleticism (Andrews, 1996; Jones, 2000; Sailes, 1993) and naturalizes the categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’ as distinct and biologically based (see also Davis, 1990). More specifically, North American sports commentators and journalists tend to identify male white players as leaders and hard workers and represent male black players as athletes with little reference to hard work or intellect (Eastman and Billings, 2001; Jackson, 1989; Murrell and Curtis, 1994; Rada, 1996; Rainville and McCormick, 1977; Wonsek, 1992) – a practice which ‘reproduces the basic colonialist critique of “lazy” subject peoples’
Although several studies point to a wider array of representations and a decreasing reliance solely on the ‘black athlete’ metaphor (Andrews, 1996; Lafrance and Rail, 2001; Sabo and Jansen, 1994; Sabo et al., 1996; Wilson, 1997), recent research suggests that televised basketball commentary remains ‘heavily imbued with conventional racial stereotypes’ (Eastman and Billings, 2001: 193). Black basketball players are, as McDonald and Andrews (2001) argue about Michael Jordan, frequently linked with lingering codes of natural athleticism that recapture the mind–body dualism that has dominated popular racial discourses (see also Andrews, 1996; Lapchick, 1986). ‘This discourse of extraordinary athleticism relies upon common sense assumptions of an innate Black physicality, a racist characterization once used to justify the institution of slavery and Social Darwinist constructions of White supremacy’ (McDonald and Andrews, 2001: 25).

Not only are racist ideologies grounded in the terrain of the past but they have proven ‘peculiarly resistant to change and transformation’ (Hall, 1981: 34; Hoberman, 1997). Indeed, Hall argues that racism is ‘one of the most profoundly “naturalized” of existing ideologies’ (1995: 19). Key effects of such dominant discourses include normalization and the polarizing of distinctions between ‘races’ so that they become understood as more rather than less different (Said, 1978). In the USA, whiteness is normalized as that which does not stand out, in contrast to blackness or other ethnicities (Fiske, 2000; hooks, 1992). In sports discourses particularly, black bodies are consistently marked as Other (Andrews, 1996; Cole, 1996). Yet the instability of dominant discourses means that the boundaries of the ‘normal’ must be constantly marked (Hall, 1981) even though, as hooks (1992) argues, these boundaries are usually invisible to members of the dominant culture.

A racial hierarchy of naming has strong historical roots according to Giglioli (1972), who argues that non-reciprocal forms of address have long marked the separation of African Americans and whites in the South – where whites were accustomed to calling African Americans by their first names but expected to be called by a title, such as Mister. Although current images of race appear to have put the past behind them, the ‘connotations and echoes which they carry reverberate back a very long way [and] continue to shape the ways whites see blacks today’ (Hall, 1981: 42; see also Cole, 1996; McDonald, 1996). Thus, although such explicitly non-reciprocal forms of address would be seen as overt racism today, analyses of college basketball and professional football suggest that sports commentary may carry traces of these representations in the form of differential patterns of naming which mark black men as subordinate to or less adult than white men (see Duncan et al., 1990; Rada, 1996). For example, based on an analysis of the 1989 NCAA basketball Final Four, in which only men of colour were referred to by first name, Duncan et al. (1990: 26)
suggested that race needed to be included in the already-established gender hierarchy of naming:

At the top of the linguistic hierarchy sit white ‘men,’ whose last names always are used; followed by black ‘men,’ who sometimes are called by only their first names; followed by ‘girls,’ and ‘young ladies,’ who frequently are called by only their first names.

Although televised sports are far from alone in their reproduction of racist ideologies, their stories and narratives are particularly potent. For example, Denzin argues that not only do most Americans understand race through media representations, but also that it is ‘only a slight exaggeration’ to suggest that sport, and particularly black-dominated professional sport, is ‘the most significant feature of the contemporary American racial order’ (1996: 319). Further, although live televised sports are commodified spectacles that draw heavily upon entertainment values, they are grounded in news media ideologies of neutrality and objectivity, which add to their perceived credibility (Cantelon and Gruneau, 1988; MacNeill, 1996; Rada, 1996; Shilbury et al., 1998). Indeed, broadcasters are cut to their professional quick when racist discourse is identified because it undermines their professional credentials of balance and impartiality (Hall, 1981). Yet, although individuals make ideological/racist statements, these ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intentions. In Hall’s terms, commentators ‘speak through’ ideological discourses that are already active in society and which provide us/them with the ‘means of “making sense” of social relations and our place in them’ (1995: 19). Thus the processes of production and transfer of ideologies are largely unconscious rather than through conscious intention (see also Lule, 1995; McKay, 1991). As Stam puts it, ‘in a systematically racist society, racism is the “normal” pathology from which no one is completely exempt’ (2001: 477).

Therefore, if the sports media systematically reinforce racist ideologies – as they appear to do – it is not because media workers are active racists. It is through the sets of practices and discourses by which knowledge is constructed in the media, not the personal inclinations of media workers, that racist ideologies continue to be recreated.

Although ‘those who control the media control a society’s discourses about itself’ (Denzin, 1996: 319), we know little about the practices engaged in by sports media workers. Well over a decade ago, Gruneau (1989) pointed to the absence of detailed case studies and argued cogently for more research into the actual technical and professional practices of televised sports production. Those who have taken up the challenge have identified a far more complex and dynamic process than has been indicated (or implied) in analyses of texts (see Davis and Harris, 1998; Gruneau, 1989; Kinkema and Harris, 1998; MacNeill, 1996; Silk, 1999; Silk and
Amis, 2000; Silk et al., 2000; Stoddart; 1994). Although not focused on racism, studies of sports media production have identified many taken-for-granted assumptions that are implicated in various ways in the production and reproduction of dominant ideologies. For example, a major challenge for live sports coverage is to create a sense of immediacy and a sense of being there, despite the absolute separation between viewer and event (Gruneau, 1989; Morse, 1983). A wide range of practices, both visual and narrative, are required 'to translate “what happened” into a program that makes “good television” ' (Gruneau, 1989: 135). Commentary, in particular, brings sense to the kaleidoscope of images through constructing the narratives that are essential to attracting and keeping the audiences that television networks need to sell to advertisers (Cantelon and Gruneau, 1988; Duncan and Brummett, 1987; Morris and Nydahl, 1985). Key among the many production practices developed to ensure viewer identification and involvement is focusing on individuals even in team sports (e.g. Williams, 1977). Duncan and Brummett suggest that ‘calling players by their names (never their positions), and often by their first names . . . is a major way in which announcers suggest intimacy’ (1987: 173).

Given that the voices of authority in televised sport are primarily those of white males (Messner et al., 2000; Rada, 1996), and that live sports commentary takes place in a high pressure, fast-paced environment where heat-of-the-moment statements cannot be retracted, it should not be surprising that commentary is marked by errors, cliches, stereotypes and dominant ideologies (Eastman and Billings, 2001; Rowe, 1999; Wanta and Leggett, 1988), many of which relate to race. Although several authors – reading off texts – suggest that the sports media are more sensitive to issues of race (Messner and Sabo, 1994; Sabo and Jansen, 1998), without investigating the practices, conventions and beliefs of commentators, conclusions based on texts alone must be, as Gruneau argues, ‘speculative at best’ (1989: 135).

Gathering Information

Part of a larger study of sports television production practices, this analysis draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods including in-depth interviews with 11 male basketball commentators and a content analysis of naming patterns in coverage of 14 men’s basketball teams: eight Division I season teams in 1995 and 1996, the 1995 men’s Final Four teams, and the two 1995 NBA finalists. The focus on Division I and NBA teams reflects the demonstrated public and media interest at these levels.

Although content analysis has been widely critiqued, I agree with Turner that the numbers generated ‘can be extremely revealing evidence’ (1997: 298). In this case, they were an important first step since, although Duncan
et al.’s (1990) suggestion of a racial hierarchy of naming seems intuitively likely, given the research into persistent racial differentiation and unequal power relations in sport, there is remarkably little research evidence to support what may have become taken-for-granted knowledge. Therefore, each instance in which a player was named was counted, and each athlete given a team ‘ranking’ based on total references. For example, the athlete on each team whose name was called most often was ranked #1, the athlete with the second highest number of total references was ranked #2 and so on. The results are based on naming patterns for 128 athletes, generated from commentary in 41 games for which either one or both teams’ patterns were analysed.

The race of each player was assigned by visual assessment or from information provided by the university he represented. While heated debates continue over race as a biological concept, there can be little doubt that racism, as a set of social practices, exists (Birrell, 1989; Davis, 1990; Stam, 2001). There is also little doubt that these social practices are lived into experience by both whites and African Americans, particularly in sports (see Hoberman, 1997). Given the salience of skin colour in the lived experience of race in America, this approach seemed to best approximate the process used by commentators to identify athletes, and was later supported in interviews.

The interviews involved seven colour and four play-by-play announcers (10 white, 1 African American) from across the United States who called at least one of the analysed broadcasts. They were a diverse group, ranging in age from 32 to 63 and included two former NBA players and a highly successful former NCAA coach. Their years of experience ranged from three to more than 25 years in television sports. Only two made a full-time living as commentators. Three were, or had been, full-time sports news directors or sportscasters, and the other six had full-time jobs unrelated to sports.

**Race and naming patterns**

It is important to note that there was extensive variation in naming patterns between teams, conferences and commentary teams. For every trend or pattern, the variation *within* race was as marked, if not more marked, than the variation *between* race, a finding that suggests caution in interpreting previous research such as that by Duncan et al. (1990), which focused on only three games. Also, there was extensive variation in commentary teams, with 41 different commentators calling the games analysed in this study. The variation may in part be related to the absence of training or...
guidelines for sports commentators, many of whom are part-time and learn the unwritten rules of acceptable commentary by trial and error. Much like viewers, sports commentators appear to pick up the unwritten conventions or expectations ‘in an unplanned, “natural” manner’ rather than being ‘explicitly taught’ (Ferguson, 1983: 170; see also Duncan and Brummett, 1987). Those who figure them out remain in the business while the others are quickly replaced, a process which reduces the likelihood of overt challenges to dominant ideologies (see Wilson, 2000).

None of the commentators had consciously thought about his naming patterns in connection with racial differences. They universally expressed surprise at the suggestion that naming patterns might be marked by race: ‘As opposed to a black thing, it’s more someone who is dealing with an audio world primarily.’ In the primarily audio world of the commentator – which is also one of the few forms of television to directly hail the viewer (Duncan and Brummett, 1989) – one of the three major components of commentary is identifying individuals involved in the action (Bender, 1994). In order to introduce the variety that is a key element of an entertaining broadcast (Bender, 1994; Jeannotte, 1994), commentators may call players by last name only, by both names, or by first name or nickname.

The overall patterns of naming suggest some support for a racial hierarchy of naming (Duncan et al., 1990). Overall, white men were more often referred to by what researchers have argued is the more respectful form of last name only (see Table 1), and black men were more often referred to by the least respectful form of first name only. However, this pattern did not hold true for every team or every level of competition. For example, Final Four semi-finalist Oklahoma State, with its white star Bryant ‘Big Country’ Reeves, showed patterns that were strongly the reverse of the overall findings: white players were named by first or nickname 28 percent of the time compared with only 1.4 percent for black players. Also in contrast to the overall findings, black players were identified by last name 88 percent of the time compared with only 65 percent for white players. Both these patterns had a strong influence on the Final Four percentages. When even closer comparisons were made – for example, between athletes with a similar number of total references – these apparent racial differences often disappeared. Where numbers supporting the idea of a racial hierarchy were visible in one instance, the pattern would be in the opposite direction in another example, sometimes within the same team.

Interviews with commentators, rather than supporting the previously proposed racial hierarchy of naming, suggested that practices and pressures related to the specific context of live basketball coverage provided stronger explanations for some of the key patterns.
Complicating the picture: conventions of televised basketball

In basketball, with its virtually continuous action, even viewers cannot always keep up with the play. The speed of the game had important impacts on the overall patterns of naming used by commentators. For example, last name was by far the most common form of identification (59%) for all athletes (see Table 2). Commentators used both names only one-third of the time, and least often they called players by their first or nicknames. Describing his process of preparing for a game, one commentator clearly identified last name as the most important part of a player’s name: ‘Normally, we’ll have all the last names geared in . . . . If I do one, I’ll do last names instead of first names . . . .’

The effect of the speed of the game is clear in one commentator’s description of his naming patterns: ‘You rarely use both names. Because of

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Naming patterns by race</th>
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<tr>
<td>Competition (% of players in the competition by race)</td>
<td>Last name only (% of total calls)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College season games</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Other (58%)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (42%)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA Final Four series</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Other (72%)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (28%)</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBA Championship series</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Other (89%)</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (11%)</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Other (66%)</td>
<td>56</td>
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<tr>
<td>White (34%)</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Overall naming patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of competition</td>
<td>Last name only (% of total calls)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College season games</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCAA Final Four series</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBA Championship series</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
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time. You want to pop one out.’ That this pattern may be basketball-specific is suggested by Rada’s (1996) analysis of professional football commentary in which players were most often identified by both names (66%) rather than by last name (27%).

The variety in naming patterns may be related in part to a common practice of using last name on first identification and both names or first name as a second reference during breaks in action, such as replays. For example:

Sometimes you use both in the sense where you say, ‘There goes Lands to the bucket.’ He makes the bucket. As he’s running up the court: ‘Shabaka for 2. Boy, big bucket by Shabaka.’ So you’ve used his last name and his first name.

Another commentator’s practices reflected a similar process:

I will tend to use first names . . . if I say something after the fact about a play . . . to express surprise or reaction or amazement . . .. If the ball is in play, my tendency is to use either both names or the last name.

Personal experiences also influenced naming choices. For example, one commentator changed his practices to focus almost solely on last names after he confused the first names of two players with the same last name: ‘I just had people irate about it and so I decided, “To heck with that. I’m gonna call them by their last name” . . . and I try very hard to do that.’ His naming practices bore out his statement, as he used only three first names in two games. However, in general, commentators saw first name use in a positive light: ‘I think of it as a compliment when you use someone’s first name.’

**Stars: first names, celebrity and familiarity**

Most teams had one player who stood out as being named considerably more than his team-mates – defined in this study as the ‘star’ athlete.’ These findings support Cantelon and Gruneau’s (1988) suggestion that the personalization process leads to coverage of only one or two ‘heroes’ in each game. Further, it supports general sports media trends towards greater personalization. Over time, this individual focus has developed into a culture of sporting celebrity – producing sports figures who are ‘likely to possess a heightened presence and affection within popular consciousness’ (Andrews and Jackson, 2001: 8). Indeed, viewers’ emotional responses to televised sport are believed to be based largely on their identification with players. As O’Connor and Boyle argue, regular viewers ‘know not only the players in a particular match, but also the trajectory of their careers to date; their performances in other games . . . [and build] up a loyalty and support for favourite individuals and teams’ (1993: 112).
In stark contrast to the assumptions inherent in previous research – that the use of first name indicates that the named person is lower on the linguistic hierarchy – it was the most valued players on each team, independent of race, who were most often identified only by their first names. Overall, only a few players, and most often the ‘star’ of the team, received the majority of the first-name references. Thus, it was the more respected or highly skilled players who were most often referred to by what has been argued is the least respectful form of address. One commentator’s remarks when discussing his use of nicknames in baseball pointed to the strong relationship between star quality and the use of first or nicknames: ‘Randy Johnson is “the Unit” because he’s a great pitcher. If he was an average pitcher, he wouldn’t have a nickname. He’d be “Randy Johnson”.’ Other stars, like then-freshman Felipe Lopez, who had come out of high school as a one-name player according to one commentator, received high numbers of first-name calls, independent of the overall patterns for his team or opponents. Thus, those players whose first names were widely used tended to be those who were well-known enough for people to recognize them by first name only: ‘Well, you assume people know who you’re talking about when you say Reuben . . . [he] was the star of the team.’ One commentator’s explanation points to the importance of context – where ‘star’ can only be understood in relation to the particular viewing audience.

I think you see that at the national level when the Chicago Bulls are playing and it’s Michael this and Michael that, and Dennis, and Scotty – because they’re stars on the national level. Well the same thing here. These kids are big stars locally – same kind of phenomenon really.

Other commentators said they were more likely to use first names for a player who was ‘a central figure’, ‘so good he’s known by one name’, ‘a star’ or ‘the guy’. This finding is supported by the naming patterns in several games where commentators who were broadcasting to a ‘home’ audience used much higher numbers of first-name calls for their home team than for the opposition. In three different games, the home teams received 64, 52 or 46 first-name calls in comparison to the opposition teams, which received only three each.

Generally, the numbers demonstrated that the higher the level of competition, the more likely commentators were to use first names. The NBA Finals, where many athletes are already celebrities and well known by the general public, had by far the highest use of first names, followed by two of the NCAA Final Four teams and, finally, a mix of Division I season and the remaining Final Four teams. During the NBA Finals, almost one-fifth (19%) of all calls were of athletes’ first names. As well, a much broader spread of players were identified by first name only. This finding suggests that assumed viewer familiarity with players is a key issue in how
commentators name athletes. Indeed, one commentator criticized a colleague for overusing first names, nicknames and initials of players who would not be well-known to the majority of viewers: ‘[It] drives me crazy. I don’t know the team. He’s like he’s talking to a group of a thousand boosters and that’s all.’

Racial dimensions: marking the boundaries of ‘normal’

Commentators deal in words and they are alert to the possibilities of ‘having fun’ with them, as well as finding ways to vary how they refer to individual players. For example: ‘You’re looking for things to fool around with a little bit, to play with . . .’ Another said:

Winston Churchill used to think the English language was a great language because it has a good sound to it and – I’m no Winston Churchill – but I like the way the language sounds so, if things sound good, I like to use them. People like to play with words and there’s a certain poetry about it and, whether people consciously think about it or not, there has to be that flow, there has to be that poetry, and so they reach out and they try to accomplish it.

Commentators used terms like ‘real definite’, ‘unique’, ‘interesting’, ‘fun’, not ‘average’, and ‘a certain resonance’ to describe first names they would be more likely to use alone. For example:

If he has a real definite first name, you can use that first name. Rashard – you could use that. Michael – you couldn’t use that. That’s how I do it and I think that is how most people would do it . . ., John – you wouldn’t call him John. That’s why you would use his last name.

Yet these choices are not innocent. They are powerfully influenced by the commentators’ location in a society grounded in racial difference. Words which seem ‘fun’ or have a ‘good sound’ are often those which are unusual or unique. In this analysis it was usually the first names of black athletes that stood out to the mostly white commentators as unique enough for the audience to be able to recognize the player on this basis alone. For example: ‘I’ve never heard of a Rashard. That is why I use it. Again, Kiwane and Shelly are sort of unique names.’ White commentators revelled in the Idaho State point guard’s first name, Shabaka, drawing out its syllables and emphasizing it during play-by-play and colour commentary. This example suggests that for white commentators particularly, some African American names appear exotic. Although it was most often star players whose first names were widely used, other players with unusual names also attracted attention:

Pervis Ellison with the Celtics. I mean Pervis is not particularly good – and certainly has not made very many great plays over the last couple of years – but when he does make a play, it’s fun to play with Pervis, with that name.
However, the practice was not limited to the names of black athletes. Bender (1994) suggests that commentators have the most difficulty with ‘foreign’-sounding names. In this study commentators struggled with multisyllabic names whose vocal combinations were uncommon in English and tended to use nicknames or first names more frequently for these athletes. Examples included Duke’s white American bench player, Scott Wojciechowski (called Wojo 57% of the time) and Wisconsin’s Nigerian-born centre, Osita Nwachukwu.9

Osita Nwachukwu . . . Nigerian last name, no-one gets it unless you hear it a hundred times because you can’t get it by the spelling – [I] have the tendency to call him Osita. Rolls off your tongue a lot easier, that’s for sure.

Overall, these practices point to the normalizing discourse of the dominant white society. For example, when asked if he would use first name only to identify player Richard Keene, one commentator responded, ‘No. Keene. See because Richard is too normal . . .’ Others stated that they generally avoided the use of ‘common’ first names, such as Michael, Kevin, Bob or John.

Although most did not recognize the potential racial dimensions of naming patterns – and some rejected it outright such as the commentator who said, ‘I don’t know that there’s anything that you could even consider partly racial about people using first names’ – at least two acknowledged it. One said: ‘Unfortunately, it’s just a function of our society that often black players kind of have different names’, while the other suggested: ‘Maybe there are more black athletes with unusual first names.’ This practice of having fun or playing with the names of people from non-dominant racial groups suggests a form of boundary-marking such groups as not ‘normal’. In this study, it may have been enhanced by its interaction with the rhythm of commentary – a practice in which commentators appeared most comfortable with a naming pattern of two or three syllables. For example, although the star players with the fewest first-name calls had one-syllable names, their first names – Ray, Scott, Jim – were also ‘normal’ within the dominant culture, even though this group included athletes who were racially identified as black and white. The stars with high first-name calls had first names or nicknames – Shaquille, Hakeem, Big Country, Corliss, Danya, Rashard, Cherokee, Shelly – which, although predominantly two syllables, were also unusual within the context of the dominant culture, even though this group also included athletes of both races. Thus the boundary-marking practices were not mapped directly on to the bodies of black athletes, but on to names that were ‘other’ or ‘exotic’ in relation to the dominant culture.
Racial ideologies and representations

When it came to representations of race, where commentators were describing rather than naming athletes, almost all the commentators were aware of the racial stereotypes identified in previous research. For example:

You always hear black guys described [as] the talented gazelle, that kind of stuff. You rarely hear black guys described as solid – the inference being that most black guys are wonderfully gifted and, if not a superstar, just short of [it], and white guys a lot of times, particularly in hoops, are ‘grinders’ and ‘solid’ and ‘hardworking’ and ‘industrious’ and black guys aren’t.

Just as academic discourse and popular resistance movements have coincided to influence coverage of women’s sport, it appears that the debates over race and representation in America have put the ‘issue’ on the table, at least at the national level. The following commentator’s remarks echo those cited in Messner and Sabo (1994: 128) when the late Arthur Ashe was told by national network executives that ‘we should stop attributing black athletes’ successes to “brawn” and white athletes’ successes to “brains and hard work”:

That is something that we have actually talked about at meetings I have attended at both ESPN and CBS [and] those of us in the business are very aware . . . of racial stereotypes, specifically talking about the white kids are smart kids and the hard workers and the black kids are the great athletes.

Yet this awareness – at the individual and institutional level – does not appear to have markedly affected the continuation of racial stereotyping in basketball, despite findings of a broader array of representations (Andrews, 1996; Eastman and Billings, 2001; McDonald, 1996; Wilson, 1997). Although all the commentators considered that racial stereotypes were still found in commentary, not surprisingly, given the ‘hair-trigger sensitivity about racial stereotypes’ (Stam, 2001: 477) in American culture, they also believed – or hoped – theirs was free of it. The youngest and least experienced commentator was the only one to say he had never ‘really considered’ his own commentary in light of race. Somewhat naively, he said: ‘I just really believe in my heart that I try to be neutral . . . . I’ve never been singled out for anything like that.’ A white former professional basketball player believed others represented athletes in stereotypical ways but was convinced that race was irrelevant in his own commentary:

I just don’t think that way . . .. When you’ve played athletics, there is no race. There is race for the outsiders and there is race for the media but there is no race when you’re playing . . . . I played the game and I’ve never thought that way.

At least four commentators were particularly concerned about the stereotype that black athletes got by purely on ‘natural talent’ and did not
'work hard' on the court or off it. ‘That’s stupid,’ said one. Another claimed:

All of us come onto this planet with certain talents. Now whether we have the work attitude to develop those is something else. And whatever your race may be doesn’t have anything to do with it. It’s what you have done yourself. And that is what bothers me: Somebody will say, ‘Oh [so-and-so] is such a natural athlete.’ It is such a great misconception.

Analysis of a selection of games broadcast by the interviewed commentators suggests that this concern may be reflected in their commentary practices. For example, four black stars were credited with hustling or working hard on the court, in contrast to only two white stars. The following quotes describe two different black players: ‘He’s working really hard . . . he’s really hustling . . . good hustle back . . . he coulda gave up on that play but he didn’t’ and ‘He just gets the workmanlike points . . . he just gets [his points] by banging and grinding away inside.’

Several commentators spoke of how they struggled to accurately represent what was happening on the court while ensuring that they did not contribute to the maintenance of stereotypes. Yet it was only the African American commentator who proactively tried to counteract stereotypes about black players when the opportunity arose:

I know in my own subtle way, I throw in those kind of things like, ‘Hey, he worked hard’ and I bet you would be able to pick those out if you took, maybe, 7 or 8 or 9 of my games.

Another’s comments point out the difficulties of grappling with issues of race in an American culture based on individualism and an (apparent) inability or desire to acknowledge structural and group disadvantage (Cole, 1996; McDonald and Andrews, 2001), and in a sports broadcasting culture grounded in an ideology of objectivity:

See the problem is that I don’t think that there’s anything wrong with describing someone as a good athlete if they’re a good athlete. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with describing somebody as smart if they’re smart. I think the problem is more a perceptual thing – you don’t want to leave the viewer with the idea that so-and-so is a great basketball player simply because they’re a great athlete . . . any of these people out there have worked their buns off to get where they are . . . I know that it’s something that I am very conscious of and I try to choose my words carefully in those situations because I don’t want to be intimidated . . .

His desire to remain ‘true’ to the events on the court, and resist the feeling of being intimidated into not describing specific black players as ‘athletes’ or white players as ‘smart’ indicates the power of dominant ideologies to normalize their positions and, in this case, contribute to a growing silence.
about the existence and influence of structural barriers linked to racial difference.

Commentators’ actual commentary suggests both support for and contradiction of stereotypes, often in the same game. Both black and white athletes were credited with on-court thinking skills. For example, Maryland’s black star was described in the following manner: ‘What great decision-making by Joe Smith . . . he never seems to panic. Really has his wits about him.’ Of the two athletes regularly characterized as ‘leaders’, one was black and one was white. The black player was described in this way: ‘He has led this club. He said, “Hey, hop on my back and I’m gonna take you into some games we’re gonna have a chance to win” and he’s done a great job’, while the white player was described as carrying his team ‘all season on his broad shoulders’. However, the only players characterized as ‘athletes’ or ‘athletic’ were black or Latino/Hispanic. Dominican Republic-born Felipe Lopez was characterized this way multiple times, and far more than any other player: ‘Oh. You talk about athletic ability . . . Lopez with the athletic steal . . . He’s got great athletic ability’; a finding that supports Sabo et al. (1996) who identified a focus on – and even eroticization of – Latino/Hispanic athletes’ physicality.

Although past research in some ways implies that racist commentary is grounded in racist ideologies held by media workers, commentators (not unexpectedly) reject this idea. For example:

I’ve never really met anybody connected – either producers or directors or people that I’ve worked with – that I’ve considered to be a racist. Now that may be my ignorance: maybe somebody would say that I don’t know how to recognize a racist – maybe I’m racist, you know I don’t know – but the people who I have worked with are generally interested in the game, and the people who they like or dislike I’ve never really noticed has anything to do with race.

However, it is clear that an implicit racial consciousness inflects the working environment. The following story suggests that racial ideologies or stereotypes are more likely to emerge when commentators are thrust into unfamiliar situations. For example, when a commentary team was unexpectedly asked to ‘fill’ some time, they focused on a half-time slam dunk contest about which they knew only the names of the competitors, provided seconds beforehand. Somewhat facetiously the play-by-play guy ‘threw’ to the colour commentator, saying, ‘Well [X] is our expert on this competition. Who do you think is going to win?’ The commentator looked at the five competitors and, without thinking, said: ‘the black guy’. Reflecting upon the experience and the mountains of mail he later received about it, the commentator suggested that when he saw four white athletes and one black athlete, he drew upon the ‘white men can’t jump’ stereotype, which was further supported when the black player won. What this story revealed is that ill-prepared commentators under pressure may be more likely to
draw upon the culture’s stock of stereotypes to categorize athletes than those who are familiar with the histories, playing styles and personalities of the athletes they are covering.

Conclusions

Live sports television is a high-pressure, high-stakes environment, particularly for commentators who are the public faces and voices of the production team. It should not be surprising that, under pressure and on a live stage, commentators draw upon widely circulating racial ideologies. Indeed, how could they not, given their location in a profoundly racialized culture? Racist ideologies may be more likely to appear when commentators are under stress or thrown into unfamiliar situations without their usual depth of knowledge about participants. In these situations, perhaps more than in others, the commentators are ‘spoken by ideology’. And it is the ideologies of socially dominant groups that are most likely to be produced or reproduced in these heat-of-the-moment slippages. For, as Rowe points out, at these moments ‘we are more likely to find out what . . . Whites think about Blacks than vice versa’ (1999, citing Blain and Boyle, 1998: 371). Further, the persistence of such naturalized ideologies of racism is indicated by the findings of recent textual analyses that representations of natural black physicality continue to be reproduced in live sports television, despite a clear awareness among the commentators interviewed of what the stereotypes were and a stated desire to avoid their reinforcement.

Overall, live basketball commentary, and particularly naming practices, take place in a complex and dynamic environment which both supports and occasionally challenges dominant ideologies about race. Commentators’ practices reflect the forces of both the practical aspects of producing live basketball and their location in a culture where racial difference is profoundly naturalized. Despite superficial apparent support for a previously proposed racial hierarchy of naming, this in-depth analysis indicates that such a hierarchy does not exist in the ways it has been previously presented, particularly when first names are primarily used to identify the most respected players, whether black or white. However, there is strong support for the existence of a form of marking the boundaries of the ‘normal’ within a dominant white culture. While some practices, such as the use of first names or nicknames to create a *faux* intimacy between audiences and star players, draw primarily upon institutional expectations and practices, they also appear to be inflected with racial ideologies. The ‘playful’ use of first names becomes part of an ‘Othering’ process which emphasizes names that do not fit the normalized (white) culture – names that are carried more often by African American players.
Notes

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1. These include describing and dramatizing the action, providing historical and contextual information, evaluating performance and game flow (Bender, 1994; Bryant et al., 1977; Duncan and Brummett, 1989; Ferguson, 1983; Morris and Nydahl, 1985; Morse, 1983; O’Connor and Boyle, 1993).

2. These included two each from the Big Ten and Big East, and one each from the Big Sky, North Atlantic, Atlantic Coast and Pac-10 conferences. In all except the Pac-10, at least four separate games were analysed for each team.

3. For example, through recent citations in Eastman and Billings (2001) and Wenner (1998).

4. Bender (1994) describes colour commentators, who are frequently former athletes or coaches, as expert analysts who provide insider information and depth of knowledge to the broadcast. Play-by-play announcers call the action as it occurs, identify key plays and players, and regularly update viewers on the score and time remaining.

5. Throughout the discussion the terms white and black will be used for brevity.

6. Note that I use the term ‘other’ specifically because those athletes, such as Dominican-born Felipe Lopez, are also ‘othered’ by the dominant white culture.

7. Several teams had two players who stood out as having high numbers of total calls, or several players who were ‘stars’ of single, rather than multiple, games.

8. Again, however, there was extensive variation in the use of first names, even for star athletes. For example, in five games with five different sets of commentators, the number of first or nickname calls for the University of Wisconsin’s star player ranged from one to an unusually high 47.

9. It should be noted that a similar practice was noted during the 1995 women’s Final Four series, when commentators had difficulty with the last name of Stanford’s Samoan guard, Naomi Mulitauopo.

References


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