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Recommended Citation

A. Lamont Williams. "The (Black) Struggle That Must Be: Black Masculinity, Black College Athletes, and Black Mental Health Through a Looking Glass" *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086231171893>

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The (Black) Struggle That Must Be: Black Masculinity, Black College Athletes, and Black Mental Health through a looking glass.

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Abstract

In this manuscript, the author describes their mental health struggles tied to Black Masculinity as a (former) Black athlete. In particular, the author focuses on the stigma surrounding mental health in the Black community, and the ways in which Blackness, Black masculinity, and mental health battles emulate the (Black) struggle that must be. The author attempts to highlight the complicated nature of mental health struggles, specifically the ways that suicide is handled in the world of sport and the ways in which the narrative can have juxtaposed racial frameworks. The author moves into and through their own personal experiences with mental health as a Black man, both in present tense and including personal journal entries, in order to make sense of ‘the (Black) struggle that must *not* be ignored.

November 9, 2018 – Part I

I once sat at my desk in the depths of a depressive state, authoring a convoluted letter of apology...to myself.

“I see why people get to this space and how they get to the point where death becomes the best option. I get it. I swear, I do. It’s a want to know what happens next. It’s a want to have some kind of idea what would come of this rigorous desire to stop your heart from beating and see who would come to the rescue.”

I remember this letter like it was yesterday, primarily because in many ways...it still lives within me, situated within the mind of the Black man that I am and the Black athlete that I used to be. I was reminded of ‘the darkest night of my existence’ after attending an academic conference in which I escorted Black college athletes into the conference environment for their first time. On the first day, we heard from a speaker discussing their journey through athletics and there was a poignant part of the story related to suicide. The speaker discussed sitting outside of their house, holding a weapon and contemplating doing the unthinkable. They mentioned staring into nothingness and listening as their child played with toys just inside the house. The

speaker then talked about the feeling of leaning their head back and looking to the sky as the (loaded) weapon touched the roof of their mouth. They mentioned tears. They mentioned the birds chirping. And then, they mentioned a phone call (Facetime) that would ultimately save their life.

(Tears welled up on the banks of my eyelids.)

Instantly, I was transported back to November 9, 2018. There I sat, the leader of this particular group, with athletes to my left and right. I fidgeted in my seat and tried to breathe deeply, as not to be overtaken with emotion. I falsely yawn and wipe my eyes, which seemed fitting to signify that the tears were from the yawn, not the flashback. In that moment, I was reminded of one of the reasons (outside of the obvious) why that night was so troublesome: as a Black man, these types of thoughts aren't 'allowed' in the Black community.

The Black athlete in me took control.

Man up, dawg. You gotta be cool. You can't be crying in front of all these folx; in front of your athletes; in front of these Black folx. You picked the wrong time to act up.

“Black People Don't Think About Suicide”

Growing up in a single-parent household, my mother was always working to provide for me and my sister, so we spent a lot of time being raised by my grandparents. My grandfather has been a pastor since I can remember, and he had numerous conversations with us about death and dying. To people like him, taking one's own life was a thought that was not allowed to enter the headspace of Black people. The culture would not allow it. Our people would not allow it. We were taught not to allow ourselves to remotely have those thoughts, but nobody ever told us what to do if those thoughts did enter our cognition. Instead, they would say things like,

“Black people don't think that way. That's the type of stuff white people do.”

“Well, when people do stuff like that, they end up in hell. Forever.”

“You’re Black. That ain’t us. Why would anyone want to do that when we already have to worry about white people doing it for us?”

In fact, the outlook held by my childhood community is consistent with literature related to the Black community and suicide. As Walker (2020) states:

In a research study that was conducted in the ‘90s, church pastors were asked their opinions about Black suicide. They responded by saying that suicide was a “denial of Black identity and culture.” To them, being Black is about struggle—there are no easy answers or easy outs. The overarching message from the pastors was that suicide is “a white thing” and that Black people are resilient because of the history of struggle and making a way despite being left out of mainstream society politically, economically, and socially. (p. 3)

Being that church is typically a major staple in the Black community, the fear of that ‘ending’ was far greater than the struggles I faced as a child growing up without a father (I met him one Christmas Day; I was 12 years old). I didn’t know why my father didn’t want me. I didn’t know why my mother’s life seemed so difficult. To put it simply, I was confused—and very angry. I did not understand why being a Black kid was so challenging, while also not understanding why ‘the culture’ demonized people who didn’t want to continually struggle every day of their lives—purely based on their skin color.

After a while, I began to realize that even though my people were telling me those thoughts were only for white people, they appeared to be secretly hiding the fact that they harbored many of those thoughts and decided not to show/discuss them. Unfortunately, that is consistent with the Black culture because there exists a general idea that Black people can ‘endure just about anything.’ Walker (2020) states,

Perhaps you have Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” memorized to remind you of the reality that Black people have been despised, in part, because we seem to thrive no matter

what. We tap into something special that has been cultivated for generations. When our ancestors struggled to live to the next day, endure inhumane treatment, and maybe...just maybe...be themselves without consequences, there was no time for emotional problems. After all, the book of Psalms says that crying endures for a night. Whether joy comes in the morning or not, it will be time to move on. (p. 1)

Traditionally, Black people are not 'allowed' to have mental health battles, struggles with anxiety, bouts of depression, or thoughts of suicide. As someone who has had their share of battles with mental health, I believe it is paramount that the Black culture begin to shift from this mindset if we are to better support the next generation of Black minds. More importantly, as leaders, we must wield the pain and trauma of the past as a weapon to inform our practices in leading the next generation. Trauma-informed leadership is a method by which we can do so, and I believe that through our pain we can inspire a generation of students, colleagues, athletes, artists, doctors, etc. to be more comfortable in reaching out when help is needed. Trauma-informed leadership is not about changing the students (or athletes), but rather a focus on changing adult behaviors by creating an environment where we transform our pain into power. We must realize that the Black experience is oftentimes traumatic and it can be through our self-work that we can realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatizing those who perhaps have not made sense of their journey just yet (Nealy-Oparah & Scruggs-Hussein, 2018).

In what follows, I work to critically situate Blackness and Black Masculinity within the context of Black male athletes and trauma-informed leadership. Specifically, I connect my personal narratives (past and present) and trauma-informed leadership practices to the stories and sentiments shared by Black male athletes in regard to interrogating their Blackness at an academic conference. Through the method of autoethnography, narratives of the self, and reflections from personal journals, I attempt to dissect the complex nature of trauma-informed

leadership, mental health, and the impact of assisting Black male athletes in making sense of the Black experience while competing in intercollegiate athletics.

The Black Athlete Self-Concept

The Black athlete is both subjectively and objectively Black. The skin tone of the Black athlete garners various social implications related to masculinity, toughness, and the physicality of the Black body as a site of savagery that must be controlled (Williams, 2021). The Black athlete must carefully interrogate themselves with thoughts of social identity related to the self, in addition to their perception of how they are being perceived by the masses. That is, the material self of their own body/existence and family; the social self, including the views of how others see the individual; and the spiritual self, related to individual emotions and desires (Epstein, 1973). Of note, the self-concept related to Blackness oftentimes also includes what some (see Cooley, 1902) may call the “looking-glass self,” which includes a complex perception of self in the way that others perceive him. In contemporary society, the Black male athlete must be hyper-aware of how he is viewed by fans, peers, teammates, coaches, family, and himself. For some, that process can be quite concerning...especially when the athlete is left to make sense of the complex nature of their Blackness without proper support from their communities (i.e., athletic, social, familial, etc.).

In order to make sense of this space, I first look internally. My experiences in ‘figuring out’ my Blackness have informed my ability to educate the Black male athletes that I have mentored over the years. I recognize that the qualitative nature of autoethnographic research exists in stark contrast to traditional scientific approaches, but a deeper understanding of the self (in regard to trauma-informed leadership) is paramount to the ways in which future initiatives will be built. As Wall (2006) states,

Traditional scientific approaches, still very much at play today, require researchers to minimize their selves, viewing self as a containment and attempting to transcend and deny it. The researcher ostensibly puts bias and subjectivity aside in the scientific research process by denying his or her identity. (p, 147)

(Un)fortunately, the Black experience does not work in silos the way that traditional scientific approaches would prefer. That is: I (and many who share my skin tone) cannot minimize my Blackness or deny it as a part of my existence, even in times when living outside of the societal restraints related to Blackness would make life ‘easier.’ As Gilroy (1993) states:

Whether their experience of exile is enforced or chose, temporary or permanent, these intellectuals and activists, writers, speakers, poets, and artists repeatedly articulate a desire to escape the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes even “race” itself. (p. 19)

Although many could argue that methods of inquiry that connect with real people and the lived experience could be seen as soft and fluffy (Wall, 2006), I assure you that there is nothing ‘soft and fluffy’ about the lived experience related to Blackness. It appears as if this wrestling match of racial identity is a struggle that must be, and it will be through the understanding of my own Blackness that I can most-amicably guide the next generation of Black males along the treacherous Underground Railroad of Black identity.

Black Masculinity

“The Black male body is polemical” (Alexander, 2006, p. 74). More simply, Black masculinity can present numerous challenges related to existence and identity, especially as an athlete. Although Black Masculinity is nothing more than a performance of (exaggerated) Black identity set forth by juxtaposition with Whiteness (Hawkins, Carter-Francique, & Cooper, 2017), Black masculinity primarily deals with the Black man’s social construction of self through carefully-crafted aesthetic movements and cultural representations of heterosexuality and toughness (Alexander, 2006). Males in this space ‘must be Black enough’ to garner the respect

and acceptance from the Black community, but not so Black as to trigger the uncomfortability of white people. White onlookers have no problem cheering for a Black male when they are utilizing athletic talent to win games for their team, but would not allow those same ‘football n*****s’ to date their daughters (Williams, 2021). Ultimately, the Black body has historically been a site of apparent hyper-sexualization and ‘savagery’ in need of being controlled by paternalistic whites (Leonard & King, 2011). “The logic might suggest that Black masculinity itself was forged out of resistance against white institutional practices” (Alexander, 2006, p. 75), which could explain the hypermasculine expectation of Black masculinity in all aspects of life (see Woodward, 2004).

Fanon (1952) takes this concept a step further in regard to the Black experience by noting that there is no escape from what he deems ‘the epidermal character’ related to Blackness and Black skin. This particular concept, coupled with contemporary discussions related to a ‘post-racial society’ (see Bonilla-Silva, 2017), places the Black athlete under another convoluted scope of racial scrutiny. No matter how eloquently a Black man (or, Black athlete) speaks or carries himself, he is still a Black man that will continually be critiqued by both white and Black onlookers (Fanon, 1952). Tompkins (2015) spoke directly to this in a rhetorical analysis of American football cornerback Richard Sherman, stating:

In this sense, post-race is predicated on its opposite – on old school racist tropes of violent, threatening blackness against which post-racial “all stars” like Sherman arise to signify the antidote: An individualized capacity to divest themselves of stereotyped blackness in favor of “positive” portrayals that remain tethered to the same ideologies that fuel overt racism. (p. 294)

As a result of the constant battle of Blackness, athletes must maintain what Du Bois (1903) calls a ‘double-consciousness’ of the Black existence. As Du Bois (1903) states,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's own soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (p. 16)

Here, Du Bois (1903) alludes to the 'looking glass self,' specifically from a Blackness standpoint; the strife related to the warring ideals of the Black existence in search for the ability to simply 'live' without constant societal impositions of existence. Double-consciousness, coupled with the scroll of additional pressures related to Black skin, can exist as a hotbed for the emergence of rampant anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

Unfortunately, I must remind you of the irony of contemporary Black culture: a Black man who engages in a sensitive awareness of mental health issues (or, any behaviors that would be deemed feminine) can be demonized for not upholding the hypermasculine front of being a strong, take-charge kinds of man (Alexander, 2006). In mainstream 'Black culture,' that 'weak stuff' is seemingly not allowed.

"Black people don't think that way. That's the type of stuff white people do."

The Black (Male) College Athlete

The Black body is continually policed, and in the case of college athletes, their Blackness is critiqued not only through their lens of double-consciousness, but also as a quasi-celebrity who just happens to be a student. For example, Young (2007) discusses the conundrum of performing Blackness:

It's not just Blacks who police other Black's language habits; whites also impose performance expectations upon us, judging whether we're talking or acting less Black than

we should or more than what's acceptable and even assessing if we're being too white or not white enough. (p. 4)

The constant battle of negotiating Black masculinity is exacerbated by the thought that young, Black athletes are often seen as the symbols of hope for the Black community. Many of these young men experience struggles in shouldering the hopes and dreams of their communities (and households), especially when some are products of single-parent households and must assume the role of 'head of household.' For those athletes, the pressure to lead, be strong, and perform for the sake of liberating their family can be overbearing, especially when most of them will have to move away from their families and attend universities with posh buildings and fine dining while remembering the sociological environments that their families have to live in. (Jones, 2020).

Many athletes can also be nudged into 'big time' sports (i.e., basketball and American football) by friends, parents, mentors, associates, and coaches who believe that major sports are the 'best' route for Black athletes to attend college and hopefully go on to compete at the professional level (Hawkins et. al, 2017). More simply, sport becomes the primary pursuit in hopes of escaping 'the hood' (Edwards, 1980). Their existence is then catapulted into the spotlight of commercialism, along with the pressures of constant performance and athletic output that subjects them to yet another set of criteria to be analyzed by. The Black male athlete becomes less of a simple 'ball player,' and much more of a cultural icon on the field of play (Williams, 2021). Contrary to popular belief, their rise to stardom in athletics does not afford the Black athlete an ability to 'shed' the societal perceptions of their Black skin, but rather subjects them to a criterion featuring a certain disregard for the racial constraints that define their existence (Boyd, 2008). "Although seemingly harmless entertainment, mainstream sports culture reiterates the common themes evident in White supremacist constructions of Black masculinity"

(Ferber, 2007, p. 12). For example, consider the ways that athletes are discussed based on their race. “Within white supremacist discourses, definitions of leadership center around whiteness and maleness. Dominant white racial frames imagine Blackness as “emotional,” “lazy,” “selfish,” and “violent,” and therefore unfit to lead” (Leonard, 2017, p. 17). Consequently, consider the ways that NBA (Black) superstar athlete LeBron James has been consistently vilified for putting himself first in his free agency decisions, while white athletes such as NBA player Kevin Love are celebrated for joining LeBron James in Cleveland in the hunt for an NBA Championship (Leonard, 2017). The Black athlete is seen as selfish for making a free agency move, but the white athlete is celebrated for joining the same fold. Once again, we are reminded that the Black athlete must operate under a different set of societal expectations, which through the lens of double-consciousness, can spark an anxiety-inducing state of overthinking (which can also lead to depression).

But remember,

“Black people don’t think that way. That’s the type of stuff white people do.”

November 9, 2018 – Part II

*“The problem is, you don’t get to watch the reaction, you just lose consciousness and venture to the unknown. I wish I knew what happens. I really do. Maybe then, people would give a f*** and make it a point to check on someone they claimed to love. Again, I want to be clear that I have the means to take my own life but I wouldn’t do so. I am simply stating that I have thought about it more times than I am willing to share, and I understand why people want to die in this world. I love the things I love, but I love love even more. It’s a damn shame that I should have to consider death and mourning to think I would [then] be loved. It’s f***** up, but that is the certified reality...”*

--

After taking some time to gather myself from the morning session at the conference, I walked across campus to rejoin the collective. Admittedly, I could not shake the thoughts related to my

experience on November 9, 2018 and I found myself intermittently stopping to breathe and stay present.

--

Come on, fam. You have been to therapy and made peace with all of this, right?

What is the problem? What is missing?

Why is this so heavy all of a sudden?

Street Talk (Conference)

I continued, a Black man, fighting desperately for emotional equilibrium as I questioning the various aspects of Blackness and the ways in which I was simultaneously making sense of my own existence while aiding in seemingly-identical interrogations taking place in the minds of the (Black) athletes I had escorted to the event. I was doing the self-work, but I needed more time; I needed a moment—but that part would have to wait.

I crossed the road and made eye contact with a Freshman athlete who appeared eager to see me. He met me at the curb and swung his right hand out to his side, preparing for our embrace as Black men. The contact of our hands produced a loud pop that felt as if it could be heard around the world. We lock hands, grip fingers, and pull each other with a dip of the right shoulder and clutch of the left arm across each other's back. When we prepare to release, he doesn't let go...and neither do I.

(Something is coming. I can *feel it*.)

The embrace felt quite emotional in nature, so once we met eyes and let go, I began to speak with no prior knowledge of how the interaction would go. Black man to Black man, I knew there was more to the embrace but I was unsure if it was me or him that sparked the emotional component...so I began to dig.

Good to see you, young man. How was your session?

“It was good, Doc.

I learned a lot about myself a got some good perspectives on other people’s struggles.

So yeah, it was decent “

(Cryptic. *Me too.* I inquire further...)

So, tell me, what did y’all talk about?

“Oh, in my session we uhh...we talked about mental health and how hard it is to be a Black athlete, you know.

It was dope.

I feel like I needed to hear those stories from other people

I mean, because...”

He trails off, adjusts his backpack, and shrugs

...but doesn’t break eye contact.

I remove my sunglasses and gently pry by slightly dipping my chin

...not breaking eye contact.

He continues,

“Because, ima be real Doc, I been going *through it*.

I’ve had these dark thoughts in my mind and when they started talking about suicide, I couldn’t help but go back to those moments.

Even just last week, I was in my room thinking about it.

I don’t want to think this way.

I don’t want to *be* this way...but I don’t know what to do, you feel me?

As Black men, nobody teaches us this part...”

In many ways, Donald was right: Black males are typically taught to be stern and to hold in all emotion. In fact, Black men are taught that men cannot show emotion, talk about mental health, or exude any behaviors that would lead the world to believe that we ‘don’t have our s*** together’ (Watkins, Walker, Griffith, 2010). Those Black male roles are reappropriated from many people in the community, including Black fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, cousins, and even neighborhood ‘friends.’ As Hoskin (2022) notes,

As mental health challenges continue to rise, some Black Americans are still not receiving the mental health care and treatment they may need. This is especially true for Black men, who are not only affected by the general barriers to medical treatment that many in the Black community face, but who also have internalized certain behaviors that fit within the social constructs of Black masculinity—ultimately impacting their help-seeking behaviors. (para. 2)

Being that I personally grew up without a father, I had to learn of my Black masculinity from the streets and in cultural congruence, the streets reinforced the ideology related to the internalization of mental health battles. That said, I completely agree with Donald’s point because I have lived it and I vividly remember an interaction I had with one of the ‘big kids’ (let’s call him Tommy) on the block when I was a youngin’. In this particular instance, Tommy berated me on the blacktop for getting upset and throwing a fit after losing a game of basketball. Granted, I was always upset and throwing fits on the court. The ‘big kids’ were always beating us and as a young, confused Black boy...I didn’t exactly know how to handle it or be ‘masculine in defeat.’ After losing, punting the basketball into the darkness, and retreating to the rustic bench near the court, Tommy approached me and pushed me off of the bench.

He said,

“Look, lil n****

You gon have to quit all that crybaby s***

That sissy a** s*** you doing ain't cool.”

(I sit up, brushing the dirt off of my elbows before balling up my fists)

He continues,

“So what, you lost.

Your pops ain't tell you this crying s*** aint cool?

*F*** you. I never met the n**** so how he gon tell me anything?*

Tommy chuckles, leans forward, and says,

“So. *F******. What”

(Rage builds behind my eyes, and I stand up...ready to fight)

“Do you realize how many n****s grow up without a pops?

You don't see the rest of us out here crying like a b**** because them n****s left us, do you?

F*** is wrong with you?”

Good question. *What is wrong with me?*

He continues:

“Quit all that crying and get your s*** together, lil n****

Ain't nobody got time for your tears.

The world ain't gon give a damn about your pops being gone, okay?

As a Black man, you gon have to figure that s*** out

...but crying about it ain't doing s*** for you

...or us”

As a Black boy, I wasn't allowed the space to show emotion (especially after losing a basketball game) and that stream of consciousness followed me throughout every single game as an athlete from that point forward. Apparently, it did not matter that I was dealing with abandonment issues (among others) due to having an absent father, the focus was on maintaining the hypermasculine Black male front. That, among other things, is the struggle that (apparently) must be in regard to Black masculinity. Many boys grow up in single-parent households, experience childhood trauma, and are taught to maintain the hypermasculine front, but I refuse to continue that cycle of negligence. Instead, my trauma can serve as a positive impact for the next generation of Black athletes. It may not 'stick' with all of them, but it seemingly 'stuck' with Donald. To me, that is impact.

I stared into that young man's eyes and saw myself; transported back to the depths of my existence a few years prior at that desk...writing the letter. Donald spoke to a lived reality that I had personally battled, along with many other Black athletes (both former and current, though hopefully less in the future). Before my eyes, I saw a young Black athlete yearning for the same level of truth and understanding that I had once dreamt of encapsulating. Donald, through the looking glass, was redefining the self-concept related to Black masculinity; his double-consciousness was becoming his sharpest tool.

Street Talk (Conference) – Part II

My conversation with Donald was abruptly cut short, as it was time for the group to take pictures and prepare for dinner. As the other athletes crowded around us, I nodded to Donald to let him know that we would have to table our discussion.

Don't worry. I'll holla at you later. I have a story that I believe will help you in this space.

His demeanor shifted to a performatively careless (Black) character.

He said,

“Thanks, Doc. You a real one.

I’m straight though. Don’t worry about me.”

I watched as the athletes began taking pictures to recap the day. We smiled, laughed, and cracked jokes as they posed for the camera, but behind my smile was the war of double-consciousness that questioned how I could help this young man. After all, talking about mental health has been considered taboo in the Black community since before either of us existed.

“Black people don’t think that way. That’s the type of stuff white people do.”

I remembered that night; November 9, 2018. I remembered many others like it where I battled the dual war of thinking I was ‘crazy’ or ‘less Black’ for thinking that way while also battling the mental health struggles that existed in my head. It all washed over me like a flood once again and I found myself standing before the crowd of athletes I was leading, forcing laughs and smiles when I secretly wanted to break out in tears. In an instant, I was brought back to the present when the director tapped me on the arm and said,

Hey Doc! Did you hear that? They are so silly! Look at this shot I just got of Jamie!
Priceless!

The director, a white woman, probably didn’t notice the war that was taking place behind my performative smile. She finished her laugh and began speaking again,

Whew, good times! Anyway, do you know where the restaurant is?

We can just walk there, it's not too far away.

I have to wait on Cassie so you can go ahead with the first group!

Oh, yeah. No worries. I'll Google it. We good.

Table Talk (Conference Recap; Dinner)

As we sat around the table, breaking bread (both figuratively and literally) and talking about our experiences, 'the flood' set in again because I couldn't help but be worried about Donald. We sat at a long, rectangle table and he sat directly across the table from me. Once he finally sat down, he removed his tie, unbuttoned the top three buttons of his dress shirt, and put his sunglasses on.

I remember those days; play it cool. *Mad cool.*

I implored the group to reflect on takeaways from the event we had just attended. The first few athletes spoke of the joy of being surrounded Black people for the first time in their lives. Black people wearing designer clothing, talking about growth and monetization, while also still being very unapologetically Black in the space. I patiently waited as the circle of reflections made its way to Donald, who was still wearing sunglasses at the time. I was unsure of what he would share, considering the conversation we had just shared prior to dinner. As a Black male, I figured he would give a statement synonymous to many of the ones preceding him while also adding a bit of flare, considering the sunglasses. He said,

“Whew, this has just been...

I just...

I needed this conference.

I needed it.

Once again, we locked eyes. The sun peeked through the windows at just the right angle that I could see his eyes through polarized lenses; those eyes that spoke of nothing but Black truth just moments prior.

“I don’t know, it has just been nice to hear so much knowledge from Black people, you know?”

To say my biggest takeaway is hard because...”

Drops his head and begins to sniffle

I dip my chin and look at him expectantly, yet patiently.

Take your time, young man. Use the words you have.

“As an athlete, I don’t talk to people very much.

I have been going through a lot lately. The last few months have been tough and I have thought a lot about how I might just end it.

I’m tired, you feel me?”

A tandem of tears crash to his lap, but his shades are still on and he is still maintaining eye contact. His tears flow, but he doesn’t look away, wipe them, or drop his head. He is present.

Yes, I feel you. Gon’ head and take your time. I’m right here.

“So, hearing the speakers openly talk about those thoughts on stage just really hit me like a truck and I had to sit there

and be a Black man

you know...

and keep my s*** together.

I wanted to get up and leave, but

I just...*I couldn’t.*

I know people would see me as weak and I...

you know, I can't have that.”

To my appreciation, Donald accepted the warm embrace from his fellow ‘teammates’ to the right and left, which sparked a moment of vulnerability where I felt it apropos to share the story of November 9, 2018; the night I tasted the silver of a weapon and almost took my own life. The power of this moment can best be expressed in our ability to use trauma-informed leadership to redefine what it means to be a Black male (athlete) and the behaviors associated with Black masculinity. Donald, staring me straight in the eye, actively diffused the pressures associated with Black masculinity by allowing himself to be vulnerable in a public setting surrounded by others (both men and women of various racial dispositions). In that moment, I saw a man who was staring at himself through the looking glass and choosing to express himself in a way that was uncharacteristic of Black males (by societal standards). As it appeared, his double-consciousness had become the main tool for expression, as opposed to a burden of existence.

The mental health of Black athletes must no longer be overlooked. As a society, we cannot spew rhetoric related to ‘Black Lives Matter’ if we are continually failing to help Black athletes make sense of their mental health struggles in congruence with being Black in America. As Hoskin (2022) adds:

The effects of systemic racism on Black Americans have been persistent and profound, and the increase in media reports and images of police brutality and violence inflicted upon members of the Black community have only added insult to injury. The impact can be chronic and traumatic events related to racism have been unrelenting for Blacks. (para. 1)

Donald and I are merely two Black males who have openly expressed our mental health struggles and thoughts of suicide, but I venture to guess that we are not the only ones. For example, suicide was the second leading cause of death for Black Americans age 15-24 in 2019

and the death rate from suicide for Black men was four times greater than Black women in 2018 (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2019). The staggering realization of Black suicide could be explained by the awareness that Black Americans are also 20% more likely to experience serious psychological distress, such as major depressive disorder, than white Americans (National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, n.d.).

Our young, Black men are dying at a rapid rate for various reasons (i.e., police brutality, gang violence, health disparities, etc.), and the time has come for societal members to be more aware of mental health battles that Black men face. In part, trauma-informed leadership can be utilized to encourage Black male (athletes) to acknowledge their needs, while also providing resources and guidance for the ways in which Black male athletes can receive the help necessary to combat mental health disparities.

In the case of the Black athlete, this shift becomes more important when we recognize the amount of isolation that Black athletes encounter during their intercollegiate athletic experience. As Donald stated, being a Black athlete can be an incredibly lonesome state of existence.

Edwards (2018) states,

Outside of the athletic arena then, the life of the Black athlete is lonely, monotonous, and unrewarding, even before he enrolls at the white school. He may be a big hero on the field or on the court, but in street clothes and even in the team locker room, he resumes his status as “just another nigger.” (p. 20)

Not only does the Black athlete face isolation related to Blackness, but also consider the ways in which college athletes can feel isolated on college campuses due to the physical separation of athletic buildings from the rest of campus and the experiential difference that many athletes can feel in regard to the general student body (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Existing research on the contemporary student athlete experience (see Navarro, 2014; Hawkins et. al, 2015; Cooper & Hawkins, 2016) asserts that the time has come for athletic administrators, professors, and leaders

to offer more support in regard to student-athlete development, and mental health needs to be one of the main priorities if amicable progress is to be made. The lives of our young (Black) athletes depends on it.

Changing the Dynamics

I would be remiss if I did not mention the progress that has been made in regard to Black athlete mental health in contemporary society. Contemporary athletes are beginning to take more ownership of their experiences and speaking out about mental health struggles. Athletes such as Simone Biles, LeBron James, and Naomi Osaka (to name a few) have begun to use their status as international athletes to motivate more Black athletes to acknowledge their mental health struggles and seek help. For example, famous tennis athlete Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open in 2021 to preserve her mental health. Although she received media scrutiny and insurmountable backlash on social media (see Osaka, 2021), Osaka received glowing support from fellow athletes and supporters in the realm of mental health advocacy! In her TIME feature, Osaka (2021) spoke directly to the importance of her advocacy with mental health:

Believe it or not, I am naturally introverted and do not court the spotlight. I always try to push myself to speak up for what I believe to be right, but that often comes at a cost of great anxiety. I feel uncomfortable being the spokesperson or face of athlete mental health as it's still so new to me and I don't have all the answers. I do hope that people can relate and understand it's O.K. to not be O.K., and it's O.K. to talk about it. There are people who can help, and there is usually light at the end of any tunnel. (para. 19)

Shortly after Osaka put the world on notice that mental health was of utmost importance for athletes, four-time Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles followed her lead by withdrawing from the U.S. Olympic team competition due to a need to focus on her mental health (Silva, 2021). Biles, known by many as 'the face of the U.S. Olympic team' and 'the greatest gymnast of all-time,' decided to withdraw from the final round of team competition during the Tokyo Olympics because she felt as if she was carrying "the weight of the world" on her shoulders (Silva, 2021,

para 3). During an NBC media interview, Biles reflected on her decision to withdraw from competition:

Physically, I feel good. Emotionally, that kind of varies on the time and moment. Coming here to the Olympics and being the head star of the Olympics isn't an easy feat. So we're just trying to take it one day at a time, and we'll see. (Silva, 2021, para 7)

Biles, like Osaka, made a personal decision to expose the taboo associated with mental health issues and redefine the meaning of mental toughness pertaining to athletes (Blackistone, 2021).

In fact, both athletes have since teamed up with mental health companies to further align their personal brands with mental health advocacy (Biles with Cerebral Health and Osaka with Modern Health).

In congruence with mental health platforms, future Hall of Fame basketball forward LeBron James also teamed up with Calm, which is a meditation and sleep app in 2019 to emphasize the value of mental fitness for athletes (Ogus, 2019). In an official release from Calm (2019), James states,

As an athlete, there's a lot of focus on physical fitness. This partnership with Calm is all about mental fitness. It's something I've always prioritized, and it's just as important to my game, my career, and my life than anything I can do physically. The ability to focus and calibrate everything going on inside your mind is a skill that can be strengthened over time, and Calm helps me do that.

Thankfully, cultural icons like James, Osaka, and Biles are working diligently to combat the stigma related to mental health and reframe the ways in which athletes utilize mental fitness as a way to acknowledge the importance of mental health. The awareness of professional athletes is very important to the ways in which college athletes can follow their lead and feel more comfortable with facing their mental health struggles. Being that many athletes admit to centering their development around emulating professional athletes that they grow up watching (see Williams, 2021), watching as athletes like LeBron James, Naomi Osaka, and Simone Biles

place their mental health stability at the forefront of their existence only stands to help college athletes to do the same.

The Struggle that Must (Not) Be

At the conclusion of our conference trip, Donald pulled me aside at baggage claim and peered into my eyes with the same look that I had come to appreciate.

He stood in front of the carousel, seemingly to ensure that I had his undivided attention, and said to me,

“Doc, you the realest. Thank you for showing me what it means to be *a Black man*.

I know I have a long way to go, but ima get there.

Thanks for sharing your story with me

and showing me that I’m not *crazy, you know?*

Ima get it together. I promise.”

My pleasure, young man. We all we got, and I always got you.

Holla at me whenever you need me, okay?

Day or night, don’t make no difference.

I got you. Always.

Discussion

Although I appreciated our closing remarks before we shared yet another Black man embrace, I found myself a bit troubled because little does Donald know, I still haven’t figured the Black mental health part out yet. Unfortunately, no one has. One thing I do know: I’m sure glad I didn’t pull that trigger on November 9, 2018 because it allowed me to turn that pain into power that has had an apparently-positive impact on this young man’s life. That is the value of trauma-informed

leadership: helping those who come after you make sense of their struggles by making sense of our own and allowing that to inform our practices going forward. It also allows us (as leaders) a space where we can deconstruct/reframe the narrative surrounding Black male expressions of mental health battles.

For example, consider former Georgia Institute of Technology commit Bryce Gowdy, who died by suicide in 2019 after reportedly experiencing immense struggles with mental health issues (Jones, 2020). According to Jones (2020), Gowdy's mother said, "...that Bryce had been 'talking crazy' and 'talking in circles' in the days leading up to his death" (p, 130).

Unfortunately, I have personally heard the colloquialism of 'talking crazy' when discussing mental health struggles, and the irony of Donald using the same language in thanking me for showing him that he was 'not crazy' cannot be overlooked. Campus leaders must intentionally deconstruct such colloquialisms and instead develop a space where Black (male) athletes can amicably voice their concerns and receive professional assistance. This is important when considering the weight of Black Masculinity standards on the Black male, who is rarely given space and encouragement to talk about mental health battles or not 'having it all together.'

In what follows, I offer three areas of implications to combat the current struggles of Black male athlete mental health: 1) implications for media framework, 2) implications for campus college athlete practitioners – conflict rules, and 3) implications for diversity leadership in intercollegiate athletics.

Implications for Media Framework

Media discussions related to suicide of athletes must also become part of ongoing discussions related to their framework. Not only does there exist the flawed ideology that mental health discussions are a 'white people thing,' but media outlets have sometimes exacerbated the

issue by the ways in which the stories of fallen athletes are covered and framed. Unfortunately, the destruction of Black males has become so indirect that Black male victims can be led to participate in—and then be blamed for their mass deaths (Welsing, 1991). For example, consider the media narrative surrounding Gowdy’s death. Numerous journalists have discussed the explicit nature of Gowdy’s passing (see [Adelson, 2020](#); [Chiari, 2020](#); [Zucker, 2019](#)), but many of the articles were only a few paragraphs of repetitive language and failed to add any justification to the story and how things developed. In reporting on Gowdy’s death, Chiari (2020) stated, “Gowdy was found dead early Monday morning near train tracks in Deerfield Beach, Florida, and it was determined he deliberately put himself in position to get hit by the freight train” (para. 4). A statement framed this way could make it seem as if Mr. Gowdy’s death was somehow justified, while also dismissing the realities of his life and family struggles related to finances and instability. Statements of such are largely dismissive to the lived experiences of young, Black athletes who face mountains of struggles and are expected to maintain the mask of happiness.

Juxtapose the narrative of Gowdy with that of Katie Meyer, a 22-year-old white soccer player who died by suicide in 2022 after experiencing numerous pressures in her life. Unlike Gowdy, discussions featuring Meyer’s death were much less about what had taken place and more about the overarching problem related to the mental health of college athletes (see [Andone, 2022](#)). The Editorial Board for the Washington Post (2022) states:

The “whys” behind the death of this vibrant young woman might never be understood; experts caution that there is rarely any one reason for any suicide but rather a multitude of factors. But that doesn’t lessen the need for Stanford and other universities to develop better strategies for dealing with the struggles of the young people entrusted to their care. (para. 3)

The article features discussions directly rooted in critiquing the need for universities to develop better mental health support systems, which is not a point of disagreement in and of itself. The

point is, we must ensure that the lives of all of our athletes are discussed with congruency and acknowledgement of the battles that athletes face in regard to mental health. It is not helpful for media coverage of Black athlete mental health struggles to blame the athlete, while coverage for white athlete mental health struggles place blame on the system/institutions. A more thorough review of media framework and rhetoric is necessary to further understand how the stories of athletes are told based on race and gender, but at the root, the media must be held accountable for such apparent discrepancies and campus leaders must be intentional in making sure that athletes are being supported as they are enduring their mental health battles.

Implications for Campus College Athlete Practitioners – Conflict Rules

It is of supreme importance that college athlete coaches, administrators, mentors, and leaders continually check in with athletes and intentionally develop a space where athletes can voice their concerns. As leaders, it is important that administrations work to develop more inclusive spaces where athletes are encouraged to confront their mental health challenges. In order for that to take place, institutions need to first assess how they (and their members) address conflict within their department/organizational culture (see Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). In this case, every department has their own particular rules around conflict, which can weigh heavily on both the practitioner and the college athlete (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008) if they do not feel as if they will be taken seriously when voicing concerns. Departments must take direct measures (i.e. training, development, workshops, etc.) to assess their institutional conflict rules, especially when dealing with Black athletes who have been historically framed as aggressive when they speak up for themselves (and others). Rockquemore & Laszloffy (2008) state:

More important that *if* a conflict exists is *how* the parties involved handle and negotiate that conflict. In and of itself, conflict is not harmful. But conflict can become harmful when it is expressed in destructive ways or when one or more people attempt to use power to leverage their position so they can force the other to concede to their point of view, or punish them if they refuse. (p. 158)

Conflict is an unavoidable part of the intercollegiate experience, but departments can work diligently to develop a space where ‘good trouble’ (see Schmidt, J.C., 2018) can take place and healthy conflict can lead to intellectual (and interpersonal) growth within the organizational culture. This is important because if (Black) athletes do not feel supported or empowered to speak up when struggles are afoot, they may believe that they just have to ‘deal with it’ and once-more direct their frustration inward. For example, athletes may not feel its appropriate to mention mental health issues out of fear that they will be seen as lazy, incompetent, or difficult. On the contrary, athletes like Donald can feel more comfortable opening up and talking about the struggles they face if intercollegiate athletic leaders show a willingness to connect with (Black) athletes on a personal level, invest in their holistic health (not just their athletic development), and offer a space for dialogic practices (see Williams, 2021) where athletes can speak to their own experiences while informing leadership on various policies and practices that may be helpful.

The work does not end there. Athletes then need resources and support in navigating their mental health journey and subsequent ‘conflicts.’ Through my personal accounts here, I admit that the road was the most difficult that I have ever faced and I imagine Black athletes may experience their own iterations of an identical struggle. Consequently, it is of utmost importance that leaders and practitioners surround athletes with effective support systems and personnel necessary for their growth and prosperity. Not to be confused with ‘coddling’ athletes, but instead motivating athletes in manners of self-authorship where they are encouraged to define their own beliefs, values, identity, and social relations (Magolda, 2008). Departments must then

connect Black athletes with mentors, sponsors, and mental health professionals that can aid in their development as Black men. In general, Black Masculinity is built upon ideals of the ‘tough’ Black man who must keep it together at all times and be the ‘breadwinner,’ but trauma-informed leadership practices allow for a space where we can reframe what it means to be a Black man in contemporary society—without the laden pressures of stereotypical social confines related to Black masculinity. At the very least, we ought to work toward a system that allows each Black male athlete to self-author their existence, while surrounding them with the resources and support to do so.

Implications for Diversity Leadership in Intercollegiate Athletics

College athletic (and, academic) departments should provide training and resources to support the mental health ‘self-work’ of faculty, administrators, mentors, coaches, and other leaders (especially leaders of color). It is important for leaders to continually do the self-work related to their personal mental health balance and make sense of the struggles that may be prior to embarking on the journey to ‘support’ college athletes, but the task of self-exploration requires support. Black mental health has become a growing topic of discussion in contemporary society (see Walker, 2020), but there remains extensive work to be done to deconstruct the stigma related to mental health in the Black community. Implementing trauma-informed strategies, development, counseling, and training could be the difference maker in regard to ensuring that leaders are equipped to assist college athletes through their journey, while also being aware of when to invoke professional intervention so they are not re-traumatizing (Black) athletes as they attempt to heal. Trauma-informed strategies are bound to unearth uncomfortable experiences, so departments/institutions must remain aware of the struggle that must be. Many Black leaders are trying to turn the tide by using pain to ignite power in future generations, but they still need help

in doing so. If departments truly care about the holistic development of their Black college athletes, they must provide the resources, breaks, allyship, and equity to those Black leaders who undoubtedly shoulder most of the ‘cultural tax’ of being the point of contact for many Black athletes.

Any other performative method of ‘support’ can lead to iterations of ‘racial tokensim’ where Black leaders find themselves working alone or nearly alone among members of other social categories and by default, becoming the go-to for all ‘racial issues’ (Ramasubramanian & Martinez, 2017). Congruently, many Black leaders are overwhelmed by the number of athletes of color who desperately seek mentoring and guidance from a leader who might actually understand something about their existence (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008), so departmental personnel must: a) support Black leaders by educating themselves on racial issues; b) implement culturally-reflexive policies to encourage equity of workload, c) empower Black leaders who need a break; and d) develop systems to support a healthy balance of duties.

Conclusion

I implore all athletic departments, especially those at predominately-white institutions, to develop initiatives to further support the mental health of (Black) college athletes. That is not to say that minority-serving institutions and historically Black colleges and universities are off the hook, but to say the experiences of Black male athletes at PWIs must receive ample attention as they are the sites of the most profitable/commercialized ‘big time’ sport programs in the nation. Alas, there is a heightened need for offering mental health services to Black athletes (and, leaders) at large. Black athletes must be given the support, encouragement, and resources to take self-authorship of their own narrative and confront their mental health challenges, just as they confront the challenges related to being an athlete in general. Campus leaders could also, through

trauma-informed leadership, better serve college athletes by making sense of their own experiences and using their experiences as a tool to foster growth and development among the athletes they oversee. It is up to campus leaders to continually do the self-work, while also assessing their conflict rules to ensure that they are leading inclusive spaces for athletes and practitioners.

In regard to athletes, Simone Biles stated in an interview that, “we also have to focus on ourselves, because at the end of the day, we’re human too,” (Silva, 2021, para. 5) and to be direct, departments/institutions must not forget that. If athletic departments (and leaders) continually allow Black athletes to be dehumanized and made to feel as if their mental health is not important, they run the risk of reappropriating the ideologies related to the dehumanization of the Black body that has plagued this very nation since its inception along the color line. To be Black in America is inherently a struggle that must be, but the struggles Black athletes (and leaders) face with mental health is, at its peak, a struggle that must *not* be ignored.

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