

Book Review

Race and Play: Understanding the Socio-Cultural Worlds of Student Athletes

By Carl E. James

Understanding the politics of student athletes and the school system is never an easy task. If you include race, class, and gender the issue is compounded tenfold. In Carl James' book entitled *Race and Play: Understanding the Socio-Cultural Worlds of Students Athletes* he argues that "sports continue to be organized around social, economic, and cultural and political structures that affirm and reinforce class, race and gender boundaries" (p. 214). James also attempts to prove that the "formation of an athletic identity can become so all-consuming that it limits or prevents student athletes from cultivating other social identities and attributes needed to navigate through society and structures" (p. 214). *Race in Play* focuses on three themes: sport racialization, intersection of sports and student athletes, and the role of leaders within sport (coaches, teachers, parents, and community leaders).

The language of the text is less academic and therefore more accessible for readership by the general population as a larger group of people who are curious about the athlete experience of minority students. As a teacher, coach, and someone who has parents from a visible minority, this book forced me to reflect on my own experiences and become more critical of my practices with student athletes and teaching. In the introduction James reflects on the purpose of writing the book and states that his goal was to appeal to coaches, community workers, teachers, and parents.

James has worked for many years with youth in downtown Toronto, more specifically Caribbean male youth. He was struck by the "intense commitment on the part of these immigrant youth to play sports" (p. 4). He also noticed that it was "not just any sport, but basketball" (p. 4). Some questions that were formulated in his mind during this time include:

Wouldn't such substantial involvement in sports distract them from their school work and hence from fulfilling their educational expectations and aspirations and those of their parents?

Was playing sports, in fact, a way of coping with the system, and with their social and cultural situation?

And what understanding did they have of the school system, and the role that basketball could play in helping them to succeed academically? (p. 4).

These questions laid the foundation for the book as James began collecting information for scholarship around such complex issues.

The author's central arguments are that minorities, specifically Canadians males of African descent, place a certain importance on sports as part of their education process. Many of the athletes admit that "sports are the reason they come to school" (p. 111). Another main argument is that sports help to create cultural spaces that allow for certain racial groups to feel more welcomed which generates a sense of belonging. He specifically examined "how spaces also become racialized and identified with particular groups" (p. 56). With a main focus on male student athletes of African descent who played basketball, he noticed that the "way these student exercise agency is in effect structured by a subculture in which sports played a key role" (p. 102).

James explores the stereotypical discourse that surrounds athletes of African descent. Comments such as "being better because you are black", "have more desire to win", and "needed to succeed more because of financial reasons" are all discussed and examined. James concludes that this "subculture, included a value system, an educational and career path, form of dress, verbal and non-verbal language, in short a 'way of being'" (p. 160). Southeast Asian, Asian and white subjects also agree that the cultural space of sports were created especially in hockey or basketball. One White student expressed that "there was an invisible and mysterious barrier that kept me and the majority of my White friends from stepping onto the basketball court, with any substantial amount of confidence..." (p. 61). James' study also included Chinese-Canadians and one in particular who suggested "that his disinterest in hockey had to do with his development of a conscious ethnic identification" (p. 71). He stated "I felt hockey was a 'White man's sport,' and that as an ethnic minority I should be playing sports that coloured kids played" (p. 71). This "persuasive racialized script" was not only adopted by the student athletes that entered the domain of basketball but almost always accepted by the coaches and teachers alike. He challenges these stereotypes and claims that such stereotypes can be extremely limiting academically and socially to black males almost forcing them to participate in certain activities without even recognizing or exposing themselves to experience opportunities elsewhere within the school system. Also, with respect to the school system, this cultural space created by sports is often the *only* place they feel successful and accepted.

A frequent sourced book in James' work is Gamal Abdel-Shehid's book entitled "who da man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures". Abdel-Shehid (2005) also alleges that the black youth of today are heavily influenced by the glitz and glamour of the NBA and the subculture has now become a hybrid of Caribbean, Canadian, and heavy American ideology. The culture of 'looking good' and having the best shoes and nice earrings was unpacked as Black male student-athletes who over-identify with the life of NBA players. They know that these NBA players worked hard and achieved success and they feel that they too will one day attain similar success. Abel-Shehid states that the "strength of the Raptors' success underscores the power that capitalist sporting institutions hold in the (re)formation of national identity" (Abel-Shehid - p. 116).

An underlying theme in *Race in Play* is the need for teachers, coaches, and community leaders to become more responsible and deal with the 'isms' that are rooted in Canadian society. For example, the author dedicates a chapter to the analysis of oppression and demands that "coaches need to help student athletes develop a critical understanding of how the inequities as well as racism, sexism, and classism may operate to produce hurdles and barriers that their determination, confidence, and

abilities may be unable to surmount” (p. 177). In addressing the inequities and racism that exist in the school system, he insists that for the minority athlete, an “alienation school system has contributed to their disengagement and dropping out of school in significant numbers” (p. 202).

Another major area of discussion is the obsession of Black male Canadian athletes to go south to obtain scholarships from American schools. He questions the goal of the scholarships and the impact/role of teachers, coaches, and parents. James finds some of the goals of American scholarships problematic for a number of reasons and states that “studies have shown that teachers and coaches, based on their social construction or stereotypes of Black males as athletes, often encourage them to participate in athletic activities at the expense of their academic program” (p. 99).

Although James asserts that the student athletes are marginalized and are not focusing on their academics, his subjects all complete or are enrolled in some form of higher education. In his qualitative analysis the student athletes remained in school and most were able to attend post secondary education. Also a handful of them became teachers, one with his guidance and support.

In addition to focusing almost exclusively on the Black male athlete, I appreciate how James includes gender and the experiences of student athletes of other ethno-racial groups. White, South Asian, and South-East Asian athletes were other ethno-racial groups discussed. James also explores the feelings of visible minority parents. He shares that some visible minority parents fear their “children would abandon or distance themselves from their ethnic or cultural values, beliefs, and identification and come to think of their culture as “inferior” or “old fashioned” (p. 204). *Race and Play* examines how other ethnic minorities, along with Whites, fit in sports in racialized school environments and “because of their success in basketball, [are] able to enter spaces of the school colonized by Black students” (p.148). Many other issues that arise for visible minority parents are discussed and James illustrates how stereotypes have limited their children.

Although the book is heavily focused on the plight of male visible minority athletes, James dedicates a chapter to female minority athletes and he makes strong arguments about the different perceptions, expectations, and inequities that still exist within institutions of sports. He uses a female basketball player who is now a professional and who provides critical insights into how “gender operates to influence their athletic participation in schools, as well as their post high school education and athletic aspirations” (p. 107). Within his studies, including the middle school students and the American scholarships, there are always female subjects that illustrate the difference in aspirations of these athletes and how their lower motivation levels for success in sport is due to a number of factors which include: a lack of knowledge, structural inequities, coaches not really giving support and/or knowing about opportunities, and the inability for females to believe they could make a sustainable career out of sport.

Finally, I believe that the author challenges all athletes, teachers, coaches, parents, and community workers to thoroughly educate students-athletes about present racism, classism, and sexism that exist in society and to adequately prepare them for the world ahead. Pursuing other interests along with sports is also another goal that *Race and Play* has recommended to make athletes realize that they do not only have to

be recognized for the athletic skill but also their intellect or any other interest in which they choose to be involved. I find that the teachers discussed in this book are received in a negative light based on the experiences of the athletes and from James himself within the education program. *Race and Play* challenges teachers to reflect on their own stereotypes and be aware of the impact they can have on minority students. It is necessary to teach about the 'isms' and create a space where students feel comfortable in their own skin. This book clearly gives us an inside look at the "volatile and diverse issues of sport specialization" (p. 223) and forces us to think about not only the structures but the people who are preparing the future leaders of tomorrow.