

## Racial Discrimination Rhetoric in *USA Today*

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### Abstract

*This is a case study looking at racial rhetoric within the sports section of USA Today over a 12-day period, examining how black and white athletes are portrayed and whether stereotypes found in other news media, such as broadcast and magazines, translate to newspapers. It found that while it did not go outside the stereotypes found in previous research, most often athletes were not framed at all. Instead, they were described simply by their objective statistics and performance on the field. When the newspaper did go into background and character descriptors, though, it stuck within the previously defined racial stereotypes.*

### I. Introduction

Jackie Robinson played his first game in Major League Baseball April 15, 1947. He became the face of integration in sports, demonstrating that black athletes do indeed have the physical ability to play alongside white ones in professional sports. But today, 64 years later, has it gone to the opposite extreme in the media, overemphasizing the athletic ability of black athletes while ignoring everything else?

For the most part, the stereotype exists that black athletes are gifted athletically but not intellectually.<sup>1</sup> Blacks and whites are compared, with the former excelling in athletics while the latter excels in intellect, both in societal thought and sports journalism. Research suggests that sports broadcasters make comments focusing on one or the other, depending on race, on a regular basis.<sup>2</sup> Even during the 2000 Men's and Women's NCAA Final Four basketball tournaments, sportscasters characterized blacks and whites differently.<sup>3</sup> Racial discrimination still exists and is even perpetuated by broadcast media.

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1 Gary A. Sailes, ed., *African Americans in Sport* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 183-198.

2 Jeff Stone, W. Perry, and John M. Darley, "'White Men Can't Jump': Evidence for the Perceptual Confirmation of Racial Stereotypes," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 19(3, 1997): 291-306; Andrew C. Billings and Susan Tyler Eastman, "Biased Voice of Sports: Racial and Gender Stereotyping in College Basketball Announcing," *Howard Journal of Communications* 12 (2001):183-204.

3 Kelby Halone, and Andrew Billings, "The Structuration of Racialized Sports Talk," (paper presented at 2008 International Communication Association annual meeting).

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## II. Literature Review

There has been a small amount of recent study done on the racial rhetoric used within sports media to discuss white and black athletes, but most of this has been done on televised productions. For the most part, though, it shows that the stereotypes are mostly the same: White athletes are more dedicated and skilled mentally, while black athletes are more gifted athletically.

### **Broadcast Media**

In general, television announcers used more positive remarks to talk about white athletes, focusing on success because of commitment, hard work and mental ability.<sup>4</sup> During the 2000 NCAA Final Four basketball tournament, the commentators' favorable descriptions were generally given to the white athletes playing,<sup>5</sup> while in 1999, Andrew C. Billings and Susan Tyler Eastman watched 66 college basketball games and found that the white athletes were characterized by their effort and work ethic, as well as their intelligence when it came to the game.<sup>6</sup> This framing extends farther than just in-game commentary, though. In the 2002 Winter Olympics, Billings and Eastman found that the hosts and reporters covering the Games ascribed the success of the white athletes to their commitment and drive in their respective sports.<sup>7</sup> In the 2004 Summer Olympics, after surveying almost 70 hours of primetime television, Billings and James R. Angelini discovered that more than two-thirds of the athletes mentioned in the broadcasts were white, and 14 out of the 20 most frequently mentioned athletes were white. While white athletes who competed, in fact, outnumbered black athletes, the difference was not so great.<sup>8</sup>

One of the main descriptors used in television to characterize black athletes has been their innate athletic ability.<sup>9</sup> When Billings and Eastman studied the college basketball broadcasts, they found that most of the success of black athletes was attributed to this inherent skill in sports,<sup>10</sup> and when Billings and Angelini looked at the 2004 Summer Olympics, they found essentially the same thing, with black athletes being described as naturally athletic, quick and powerful, without much mention to their passion or dedication.<sup>11</sup> In the research on the 2000 Winter Olympics, Billings and Eastman also found another difference: The backgrounds of the black athletes were more often talked about than those of white athletes.<sup>12</sup> In 1996, 340 hours of international athletic events were studied, and Don Sabo, Sue Curry Jansen, Danny Tate, Margaret Carlisle Duncan, and Susan Leggett discovered that while treatment of race varied from production to production, very few actually negative representations of black athletes appeared in the broadcasts.<sup>13</sup> This televised representation is important because in the late 1980s and 1990s, the presence of blacks grew exponentially, and Herman Gray asserts that this has shaped how society views blacks and race in general. As the amount of network-television space was devoted to blacks increased, people began to gain more and more exposure to racial characteristics. Gray argues that sometimes it brought to light the similarities between whites and

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4 Andrew C. Billings and Susan Tyler Eastman, "Selective Representation of Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Television Coverage of the 2000 Summer Olympics." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 37 (2002): 351-370; Bryan E. Denham, Andrew C. Billings, and Kelby K. Halone. "Differential Accounts of Race in Broadcast Commentary of the 2000 NCAA Men's and Women's Final Four Basketball Tournaments," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 19 (2002): 315-332; Billings and Halone, "The Structuration of Racialized Sports Talk"; Billings and Eastman, "Biased Voice of Sports." 183-204.

5 Denham, Billings, and Halone, "Differential Accounts of Race in Broadcast Commentary"; Billings, and Halone, "The Structuration of Racialized Sports Talk."

6 Billings and Eastman, "Biased Voices of Sports," 183-204.

7 Billings and Eastman, "Selective Representation of Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationality," 351-370.

8 Andrew C. Billings and James R. Angelini, "Packing the Games for Viewer Consumption: Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationality in NBC's Coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics," *Communication Quarterly* 55 (2007): 95-111.

9 Billings and Eastman, "Selective Representation of Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationality," 351-370; Billings and Eastman, "Biased Voices of Sports," 183-204.

10 Billings and Eastman, "Selective Representation of Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationality," 351-370.

11 Billings and Eastman, "Biased Voices in Sports," 183-204.

12 Billings and Eastman, "Selective Representation of Gender, Ethnicity, and Nationality," 351-370.

13 Don Sabo, Sue Curry Jansen, Danny Tate, Margaret Carlisle Duncan, and Susan Leggett, "Television International Sport: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalistic Bias," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 20 (1996): 7-21.

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blacks, bridging the racial gap, but other times it upheld white stereotypes and widened the gap.<sup>14</sup>

### **Print Media**

Print media have been studied but not in as great depth as television. Andrea M. Eagleman looked at articles on Major League Baseball in *Sports Illustrated* from 2000-2007, finding that 80 percent of the time, white athletes are again characterized as working hard in order to succeed, whereas hard work wasn't prominent in talking about black players. Articles also discussed off-the-field hobbies and physical descriptors and focused on the role of the father in teaching the white athlete to play. In contrast, articles centered on black baseball players' backgrounds and families, referencing mothers more often, especially single mothers. There was also the theme of overcoming obstacles, mostly in proving themselves to the public in terms of race, personality and character, physical appearance, and on-field performance. While white players sometimes have to overcome the same obstacles, those themes weren't mentioned.<sup>15</sup>

In another study of *Sports Illustrated*, Eugenio Mercurio and Vincent F. Filak looked at articles on prospective National Football League quarterbacks leading up to the NFL Draft from 1998 to 2007. In these articles, white quarterbacks were characterized as less physically talented, but more mentally prepared and less likely to make mental errors. On the flip side, the writers emphasized the black quarterbacks' physical gifts but lack of mental prowess.<sup>16</sup>

In the literature on the subject of racial rhetoric within sports media, there is a hole where newspapers are concerned—and more print media in general. This research looked to fill that gap and see if racial stereotypes between black and white athletes exist within the newspaper medium and determine whether the conclusions drawn by previous research is valid in this area.

### **Research question**

When writing about athletes in the newspaper, do racial stereotypes exist for black and white athletes?

### **Hypothesis**

Tendencies of racial rhetoric in newspaper writing exist in the facts chosen and the characteristics ascribed to players, and the conclusions drawn in previous research can be applied to newspapers.

## **III. Methodology**

To begin, the national newspaper *USA Today* was selected to study. It was chosen because of its large national readership—nearly six million readers daily.<sup>17</sup> It has a wide public prominence, and therefore how it frames race and athletics is important, and it has a section just for sports. The sports section of the newspaper was then read for 12 days: September 21, 2011, to October 6, 2011, excluding Saturdays and Sundays since *USA Today* does not publish on weekends. Because there can be more than 10 pages in each sports section, every third article was chosen to read and code.

First, each article was scanned for mentions of current athletes. Coaches and former athletes were excluded because oftentimes these people's athletic ability is not discussed. From the current athletes mentioned, only the white and black athletes were coded. This study looked specifically at the difference in rhetoric between white athletes' descriptions and black athletes', so other ethnicities were not necessary. Articles not containing current black or white athletes were ignored.

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14 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

15 Andrea M. Eagleman, "Stereotypes of Race and Nationality: A Qualitative Analysis of Sport Magazine Coverage of MLB Players," *Journal of Sport Management* 25 (2011): 156-169.

16 Eugenio Mercurio, and Vincent F. Filak, "Roughing the Passer: The Framing of Black and White Quarterbacks Prior to the NFL Draft," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 21 (2010): 56-71.

17 "Gannett Brands: USA Today" Gannett Co. Inc., <http://www.gannett.com/section/BRANDS&template=cover>.

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Then, how each athlete was mentioned on first-reference was coded. Athletes could fall into one of three categories:

- Basic: Basic information was given, such as a position, team or hometown.
- Statistics/awards: The athlete was introduced with a mention of recent statistics or awards received.
- Positive, subjective description: Commentary on the skill-level or the innate characteristics of the athlete accompanies the mention.

Based on the norms of journalism, the most important information is given right away. For this reason, what information is introduced right after the athlete is mentioned will be the most important, so this study will record which of those three categories each athlete fits into on first reference.

Finally, framing themes in the articles will be noted. If the athletes are only mentioned within the context of the sporting event and only objective facts or statistics from the event are given, then the article falls under a normal framing context. If any other type of theme exists, that frame is recorded.

## IV. Findings

From September 21 to October 6, there were 322 articles, which, once every third article was chosen, amounted to 107. Twenty-seven of those pieces did not contain a mention of currently competing athletes, leaving 80 to be coded. Table 1 shows the breakdown of articles by what sport each one primarily centered around. The time period chosen for research fell on Major League Baseball's post-season playoffs and the beginning of football season, which explains why about 60 percent of the articles are about those two sports.

**Table 1. Articles by Sport**

Sport	Number of articles	Sport	Number of articles
Football	27	Basketball	4
Baseball	26	Hockey	3
Racing	6	Tennis	2
Golf	5	Soccer	2
Fighting	4	Running	1

Within these 89 articles, there are 495 first references to athletes (only eight of those were women). More white athletes were present, representing just over half with 278 first references. Meanwhile, there were 217 black athletes. Because it was a short period of time, most of the star athletes in the in-season sports came up repeatedly. This was true especially in the baseball stories, where there were only a few teams left in the playoffs and only a handful of important players on each team. For this reason, each first-reference mention of an athlete was tallied and every article describing that athlete was examined, instead of what other researchers did by simply selecting one single prominent article during the entire research period.

The majority of athletes were mentioned with just their basic information: 77 percent of white athletes were characterized only by their basic identifiers, while 67 percent of black athletes were done so. Athletic achievements, such as statistics and awards, were more often attributed to black athletes than white athletes, amounting to 29 percent of the first-reference mentions for black athletes, as opposed to 21 percent for white athletes. Furthermore, black athletes were also introduced more often with positive, subjective descriptors: 4 percent, compared to 2 percent for white athletes. Table 2 shows the number of categories by which they were first depicted.

**Table 2. First-reference Categories of Athletes**

	White athletes	Black athletes
Basic	213	145
Statistics/awards	60	64
Positive descriptors	5	8

While most of the athletes fell within the context of recap from the event or analysis of an upcoming event, a few themes appeared in a few of the articles. For example, the idea of the underdog appeared in four of the articles. Three of those were in reference to white athletes, each using hard work and perseverance to overcome obstacles. One of those was Drew Brees, who the article said “does not possess prototypical size” for a quarterback, but he is continuously able to rise to the occasion because of his spirit and drive for the game.<sup>18</sup> The only “underdog” article centered around a black athlete, “Sproles does it all in Saints’ victory,” told the story of Darren Sproles, who, like Brees, is small for his position, but instead of hard work, Sproles beats the odds because of his physical abilities, such as his speed.<sup>19</sup>

The literature on sports journalism pointed to findings that black athletes were characterized by their athletic abilities, while white athletes were characterized more for their intelligence and hard work. As the numbers above indicated, this wasn’t found much within this study. Most of the athletes were simply described by their actual accomplishments within their specific sports—although there were a few exceptions. Four articles distinguished a black athlete for his physical talent, while four portrayed white athletes as having what sports refers to as “intangibles,” the intrinsic characteristics that will make a player or team win. Dallas Cowboys’ Tony Romo is able to get a “gut-check win,”<sup>20</sup> and Iowa State University can count on “production when the game is on the line” from quarterback Steele Jantz.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Baylor University’s Robert Griffin III “can do so many things,”<sup>22</sup> and Oakland Raiders’ wide receiver Denarius Moore is noted as having an “array of skills.”<sup>23</sup> While this is a small number that is not conclusive, it is interesting to note because this trend never went the other way. White athletes were neither distinguished for their exceeding athletic talent, nor were black athletes set apart for their hard work and drive to win.

One trend is that black athletes are more likely than white athletes to be depicted as getting in trouble. In the 12 days of study, there were five articles in which an athlete either got arrested or accused of competing unfairly. These five articles include eight athletes—only one of them was white. The one white athlete who got in trouble, Paul Hamm, was mentioned in a brief at the very bottom of a list of briefs, so it was hidden among the other headlines.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the other seven athletes in trouble all either appeared in full articles or in the very top brief. However, of the four articles centering on black athletes, only one of them was about an actual arrest. Two of them were about NCAA violations stemming from breaking collegiate rules, but no violations of the law. The final one was about playing unfairly on the field. Paul Hamm’s article was about his arrest stemming from an assault charge.

## V. Conclusion and discussion

Within this study, it can be concluded that, while tendencies are present to stay within the stereotypes previously established and continually seen in other forms of news media, the newspaper displayed the athletes more objectively according to their personal performances and statistics than others. Other frames come into play every now and again, but for the most part, the newspaper lets the statistics and actions speak

18 Jon Saraceno, “Brees leads Saints’ emotional rally,” *USA Today*, September 26, 2011.

19 Jon Saraceno, “Sproles does it all in Saints’ victory,” *USA Today*, October 3, 2011.

20 Jarrett Bell, “In an instant, reputations can be rebuilt,” *USA Today*, September 28, 2011.

21 Eddie Timanus, “Big 12 to feature big battles among unbeaten,” *USA Today*, September 28, 2011.

22 Ibid.

23 Robert Klemko, “Rookies make strong opening statements,” *USA Today*, September 29, 2011.

24 Compiled by John Tkach, “Gymnast pleads not guilty in assault,” *USA Today*, October 6, 2011.

for themselves, with little emphasis of its own to sway the perception of the athlete.

This makes sense based on the nature and purpose of the newspaper as compared to other forms of news media. Broadcasting is typically live and more off-the-cuff, and therefore it would make sense that some preconceived notions and bias can sneak in and thus perpetuate the cycle of racial stereotyping. At the same time, magazines are typically meant to be more feature-like and go more in-depth into the personality and character of the athletes. It makes sense that more subjective judgments show up in these sorts of publications. However, newspapers don't fall into either of these categories. They are expected to be objective and informative, with several layers of editors to look over the content and make sure that stories fit those criteria without letting any bias in. Sometimes the newspaper runs more of a feature piece, and a majority of the time, this is where the framing of athletes outside of basic modifiers came into play within the study.

This study cannot make any generalized conclusions, however. It was only a small case study of one national newspaper, and therefore these results cannot be extrapolated to all newspapers. It cannot even really be expanded to encompass the entirety of *USA Today*—it can only be generalized to a specific point in the year. Only a select group of sports were seen, and the results could be different if more articles on other sports outside of the primary baseball and football had been selected. This study should, instead, stand both as a pilot study for a more extensive study of this national newspaper on these issues and as a stepping stone to looking into the differences among syndicated national newspapers and more localized ones with a smaller staff and fewer resources.

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