

Race Representation in Sport: A Hollywood Glimpse

Although issues of race and sport in the United States are certainly present and obvious, many would rather these issues not be addressed. Some may choose to ignore them, perhaps stemming from a belief that if we single out the black athlete for discussion, we only perpetuate engrained stereotypes. As a result, American culture urges us to see through two lenses—a lens that insists that we see the black athlete as someone “different” and someone that was provided God-given talent; and a lens that sees the black athlete as athletically superior but intellectually inferior. But maybe, these perceived notions exist simply for the reason that race in general is such a powerful societal force—the struggle to understand those that are “different.” Hollywood has latched onto race and sport partially because it is an area of contemporary American culture that receives little attention. The films *Glory Road*, *Remember the Titans* and the documentary *Hoop Dreams* depict not only the black athlete’s experience, but also how the game doesn’t care about one’s color. What seems to matter is collective hard work and passion and setting goals to achieve a common goal and trust.

Glory Road is the story of Don Haskins, head coach of tiny Texas Western University in El Paso, Texas. Set in the 1960s, a time in which college basketball in the south was segregated, Haskins made history by starting five African Americans in the 1966 National Championship game against national power Kentucky, a team that did not have one black athlete. Haskins’ decision was not a reflection of his desire to be a racial pioneer, he’d later say, but simply to put the five men on the court that he believed would

give Kentucky the most trouble. And they did—Haskins' team upended Kentucky 72-65, shocking the college basketball nation. At this time, racial unrest in the United States was at a high (although most teams did carry some black players). Most college coaches were reluctant to have a black majority on the floor at any one time, due to their own prejudice or fear that their program would become the target of public scrutiny that could perhaps hurt recruiting efforts. Starting five black players simply wasn't done, especially not on college basketball's grandest stage.

Remember the Titans, conversely, is the story of high school football in Alexandria, Virginia. Set during the 1971 T.C. Williams High School season, several race-oriented issues arise, heightened during training camp when black and white players clash in racially-motivated conflict. The film's protagonist, head coach Herman Boone, is a black man hired to head the football team in place of Bill Yoast, a white man that stays on board to fill an assistant coach capacity. Boone not only has his work cut out for him to coach and rally a football team, but also to convey to his team that a winning attitude stems from tolerance and embracing each other, not racial intolerance. The Titans went on to win the Virginia high school state championship, a testament to the athletes' willingness to celebrate diversity.

While *Glory Road* and *Remember the Titans* are films made as Hollywood epic feel-good success stories, *Hoop Dreams* is a real-time documentary that tracks the lives of two African American basketball players. William Gates and Arthur Agee are recruited to play basketball at the predominantly white high school and basketball power St. Joseph High School in Westchester, Illinois. The movie puts on display life in inner-city Chicago and the sharp contrast with a new life in suburban Westchester. The boys

are exposed to long and enduring practices, in addition to a new social environment. Three hours of footage display how both William and Arthur use basketball to escape society and the unfavorable circumstances they face on a day-to-day basis. While their transfer to a private school is beneficial in most regards, both boys experience some hardship along the way, even in their new setting. Arthur doesn't mature as a player as quickly as coach Pingatore would have liked, and is forced to leave public school where his grades plummeted and he didn't have the support system that he had at Westchester. William, conversely, is the more athletically gifted of the two (and contributed on the varsity squad), but a knee injury and surgery leaves William without the support and comfort that basketball is for him.

All three films are not about winning, but the winning process. *Glory Road* and *Remember the Titans* are structured linearly, where there is initial discomfort with racial differences. As the stories progress, characters become more comfortable with one another and understand that the sport that they engage in is a common bond. The second scene of *Remember the Titans* shows Boone encouraging racial integration on the bus ride to camp by requiring that a black player sit next to a white player and learn "particulars" about one another. Players did not warm up to this idea, which carried onto the field; blacks didn't block for whites, whites didn't block for blacks and nowhere was togetherness found. Boone brought the team to the battle site of Gettysburg, where he proclaimed that "if we don't come together, we too will be destroyed." The team began to joke with each other, sing to one another and dance. They began to play football as a team and left camp possessing the same vision—to represent what it means to be a Titan, as said by Boone on opening night: "In Greek mythology, the Titans were greater even

than the Gods. They ruled their universe with absolute power! Well that football field out there tonight, that's our universe. Let's rule it like Titans!" *In Glory Road*, Haskins instills a toughness-at-all-costs philosophy. He conveys to his team that basketball and pride are synonymous, that winning comes as a result of hard work, not from race. *Hoop Dreams* does not have the coach protagonist that carries us through the winning process (like Boone and Haskins), but William and Arthur experience winning differently. The process involves dreaming for a better life. Unfortunately for both boys, options were limited except for basketball—and their dreams—which allowed the boys to look to win not only on the basketball court, but in life.

Hoop Dreams in particular documents how basketball—or any sport—can be an escape from hardship and a glimpse into a better life, but also a trap that perpetuates the same initial adversity. Both boys are promised a better future. Coaches represented scholastic achievement as a top priority during their recruitment visits, and suggested that their children would be much better off in a private school environment due to increased supervision and regulation. While Arthur and William were provided some hope for their future, they were forgotten about as soon as adversity hit them on the basketball floor; William was not good enough to make the varsity team and his prospects as a player soon fade, forcing him to abandon much of his scholarship and return to public school. Arthur begins to encounter academic problems most likely due to being sidelined with a knee injury. Basketball is everything to these boys, and once it is taken away from them, they are sent into the same hardships that initially seemed remedied. Administrators, and specifically coaches, perhaps don't intentionally make false promises as in the documentary. But what many coaches may not realize is that when coaches are

attempting to build a top-level program, the sport in which they coach happens to be an escape, a dream into another life for many residents of inner-city neighborhoods. It isn't so much an organized and structured institution; rather, basketball is the sound of chain nets and the sound of sneakers not on shiny hardwood, but on cracks in the tar. It's a game that involves improvisation and one-on-one play, a sharp contrast to the brand of basketball that most college coaches preach and ask for. Basketball has evolved into a hip-hop and African game, mainly because of its presence in inner-city neighborhoods. Coaches have begun to target these neighborhoods, thinking that a scholarship would entice many of these ever-so-"talented" athletes.

What about talent? Why is that we can comfortably suggest that blacks have God-given "black" talent? The danger in suggesting this is that we may imply that blacks are lazy, that their talent somehow allows them to avoid the course of life. Stereotypically, having talent is the "easy way out." Their talent, as suggested, is not pure and achieved, but "lucky." On the surface, it may appear that blacks are more talented in the sense that a majority of NBA stars are African American, but taken a step further, talent stems from repetition. In inner city neighborhoods (such as the home for William and Arthur), the courts are occupied before school, during school and after school. They don't see education as a way into a better future. Working on a crossover dribble or a 15-foot jump shot is the hope needed to survive. No one was born an NBA player; rather, many blacks aspire (although few reach) to be NBA stars, with the hope that basketball can provide an outlet to a better living situation at an individual and familial level.

All three movies involve either basketball or football and African Americans. This shouldn't come as a surprise because blacks are disproportionately represented in basketball and football (as well as track and boxing). Very few black athletes participate in lacrosse, soccer, golf and hockey, among others, and this may be due to a white preconceived fear that they simply can't compete with blacks in basketball or football. Maybe that is why, in *Remember the Titans*, whites and blacks were in constant conflict at the beginning of the season. Part of being "white" is living a life of privilege. "Whiteness" encourages prestige and entitlement. During black/white conflict in the film, the white players felt entitled to playing time. They saw blacks as an obstacle to being a superstar. Before they knew each other, they didn't know that they enjoyed the same music, they didn't know they could relate to their hometown and they didn't understand how to be shaped by their biggest bond—football. Sports are about filling roles, putting together pieces of a puzzle that fit into a greater system, towards a larger goal, and the T.C. Williams Titans and the Texas Western Miners embraced racial differences to transform the sports landscape of the time.

It is widely known and accepted in today's wide world of sports that black athletes are here to stay. Some of our favorite athletes are African American, and we watch replays in awe over and over again of the poise and dedication that Michael Jordan brought to the Chicago Bulls organization, winner of three consecutive NBA titles. We are amazed by Tiger Woods' precision on the golf course, to the point that we wonder if he is *the* greatest athlete in the world. We are reminded of our past during these movies, and then are reminded of our present and future when Lovie Smith and Tony Dungy square off in a Super Bowl in which, for the first time, two black head coaches

faced each other in the NFL's greatest stage. *Glory Road* is the story of the first time that five black men started in an NCAA basketball game, while *Remember the Titans* seems to be one of the first times that a black head coach led an integrated high school football team in the south to a state championship. There is a first to everything, which reminds us that we still have a ways to go. Blacks are still few and far between in decision-making positions in sports, from coaches to league executives. It is easy for us to see that black coaches exist at a much lower rate than their white counterparts, which is interesting because in the NBA and NFL, over 50% of players are black. As a society, we are oddly apprehensive about placing blacks in decision-making positions. This isn't any different in sports.

Surely, *Remember the Titans* and *Glory Road* are Hollywood hits that prioritize raking in box office profits ahead of promoting social change, or suggesting the intricacies of race and sport. There is an interesting dichotomy between maintaining an entertainment value and portraying the past as something supposedly far different from what we see today. Both films have historically accurate segments, while both seemingly ignore important details or add details that are added only to enhance each film's entertainment value. For example, producers of *Remember the Titans* have been scrutinized for the portrayal of racial tension at training camp. Critics have suggested that tension arose simply because of competition for positions, not because of race. The 3 a.m. trip to Gettysburg did not really happen. Gerry Bertier and Julius Campbell did become friends in actuality, but their relationship was not a pivotal example of integration as in the movie. Some have even suggested that the racial tension in the community is not historically accurate. T.C. Williams High School was integrated in

1965, six years prior to the 1971 season. Although the portrayal of the community as a heavily segregated one may be an exaggeration, surely there were some forms of discrimination present and the Titans played a positive role in bringing the community even closer together.

In *Glory Road*, the movie is romanticized when we find out Haskins wins the title in his sixth year, not the first, as viewers are led to believe. The coach actually inherited two black players, while the film implies that Haskins recruited all seven. The style of play probably is not congruent with the play of the 1960s, either. The playground style, the reverse dunks and fast-break pace really didn't have its course until the Julius Erving (or Dr. J) era.

Of course, *Hoop Dreams* is realistic. We see two young men searching for the American Dream, and we see realistic portrayals of inner-city culture. Both *Remember the Titans* and *Glory Road* have exciting and exhilarating finishes that make the stories memorable. However, in the race and sports discussion, we must remember that fantasies of big-time wealth and celebrity status in the world of sports are virtually unobtainable and reserved for only a select few individuals. We see that basketball for William and Arthur isn't a game, played for fun. "For love of the game" has no place in this discussion; both boys are exploited by these images of wealth and celebrity and see basketball as a way to achieve greater heights. *Hoop Dreams* isn't about a triumph in the face of adversity or the foundation of sports clichés—it's about real life.

All three movies suggest what sports are about—facing adversity and responding to it constructively, setting collective goals and working to achieve them as a team and embracing a collective passion of a particular sport. The movies *Remember the Titans*,

Glory Road as well as the documentary *Hoop Dreams* explore several key issues in race and sport, from the black athletic journey to the racial tension that has historically influenced and currently influences what sport means to our culture. Coach Boone said it well: “People say that it can’t work, black and white; well, here we make it work, every day. We have our disagreements, of course, but before we reach for hate, always, always, we remember the Titans.” While some urge that we don’t have the race and sport discussion, we must in order to fully appreciate how diversity to our games brings a heightened dimension to the sports that we love. What we’ll realize is that there really is little difference between the black athlete and the white athlete except their history. They are on the field for the same reason, not for any reason but a simple love and determination to succeed, to play hard, and to achieve a collective holy grail.