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Amateurism as a Narrative of Control: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Lived Experiences of College Athletes

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The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) uses amateurism as a narrative to control college athletes, which affects how scholars are able to conduct research with this population. This article speaks to issues that arise among qualitative researchers at different institutions when universities control access to athletes under the guise of the 'amateurism' narrative. Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), we provide insight into the habitus of athletic departments through autoethnographic vignettes to highlight issues of access to the collegiate athlete population. We simultaneously speak against amateurism as a controlling narrative and argue that there is a need for more immersive research among college athletes to better understand athlete lived experiences. From our different disciplinary perspectives, we offer three solutions to this issue that involve the integration of athletes, qualitative researchers, and practitioners to inform collaborative efforts that directly impact the athletes on college campuses across the country.

Keywords: qualitative research, amateurism, habitus, total institution, collaboration, NCAA

Introduction

At the end of the 2021 college football season, unflattering details about college football players' experiences were circulating widely. These athletes, after all, had been asked to expend their athletic labor on behalf of their universities for no financial compensation during a multi-year global pandemic. In response,

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academicians pushed this conversation into the public discourse across outlets like *Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, Chronicle of Higher Education, The Assembly,* and *Washington Post* (see, for example, Kalman-Lamb et al., 2021a; Kalman-Lamb et al., 2021b; McGregor, 2021; Starn, 2021). These scholars argued that all college athletes, but especially football players, were being exploited by their universities, all in the name of amateurism, a notion that works to limit the rights of 'student-athletes.' College football players, specifically, are predominantly Black men, accounting for 47% of all Division I football athletes in 2021 (NCAA, 2021b). Statistically, these athletes are overrepresented on the football field and underrepresented in their college classrooms (Harper, 2018). One of the consistent issues discussed in these public pieces is the exploitation inherent in relying on young Black men's athletic labor to power the college football system and to fund the salaries of White administrators and coaches, all while they risk injury and receive devalued degrees from their universities.

These scholars were not the only ones having conversations about the utility of the notion of the 'student-athlete' (Abruzzo, 2021; *NCAA v. Alston,* 2021; Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). There is clearly an interest in understanding the relationship between the two terms in this dually indexed identity and how to improve the institutions and systems that these athletes must navigate on a daily basis.

In his 1995 memoir, Walter Byers, former Executive Director of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), presented a scathing (and accurate) critique of the bureaucracy that still holds true today. Byers (1995) argued that the current "high-dollar, commercialized college marketplace" (p. 2) was in no way fair for those athletes who labor on playing fields, instead skewing largely in favor of the universities, programs, administrators, and coaches who financially benefit from athletes' work. In this article, we look closely at the ways that "collegiate amateurism is not a moral issue; it is an economic camouflage for monopoly practice" (Byers, 1995, p. 376) that allows for various sporting institutions to order and discipline college athletes. We agree that the notion of amateurism, through the fallacy of the student-athlete, has been mobilized by sporting institutions to exploit the very population they claim to protect. We offer three solutions to this issue that involve the integration of qualitative researchers and practitioners to inform collaborative efforts that directly impact athletes on college campuses across the country.

In this collaborative piece, we take Byers' critiques seriously and ask: how do these institutions control college athletes' time, bodies, and labor? What can be gained by studying their experiences from a qualitative lens? How can this data be used to inform practitioners who are committed to bettering athletes' experiences? This article primarily is geared toward practitioners at the collegiate

level. However, our overall recommendations and takeaways can have implications for practitioners at all levels.

Exploiting the Amateur 'Student-Athlete'

The 1950s were riddled with issues concerning college athlete health, due to the physical injuries these young students were sustaining. In fact, one of the reasons cited for the creation of the term 'student-athlete' is a court case in 1955. At that time, the notion was mobilized to protect the NCAA from having to pay workers' compensation death benefits to the widow of a college football player who died while playing the sport (Clarke, 2021; Given, 2017; Slothower, 2014; The Daily Tar Heel Staff, 2020). College athletes could not be considered professionals or employees, Byers argued at the time, because they were instead student-athletes who performed an amateur role at their universities. Ever since the 1950s, the term 'student-athlete' has been used by institutions to structure, order, and exert power over athletes' lives and to ultimately make it impossible for them to be fully compensated for their true value to their universities. Further, the narrative is flexed in exploitative ways to limit access to the athletes who participate in these bureaucracies.

Notably, Branch (2011) dubbed 'amateurism' and 'student-athlete' as "cynical hoaxes, legalistic confections propagated by the universities so they can exploit the skills and fame of young athletes" (para. 12). To better understand this claim, we examine it through Bourdieu's (1984) habitus to analyze amateurism as a controlling narrative. This approach allows us to understand how institutions, like the NCAA and its member institutions, use this notion to directly impact the lives of college athletes.

We are not the first to highlight the exploitative nature of the 'student-athlete' dynamic. There are plenty of academic discussions that detail and analyze how college players are used, in multiple ways, by their universities and sport programs (Bennett & Zirin, 2018; Edwards, 2017; Hatton, 2020; Hawkins, 2010; Rhoden, 2007; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Scholars who do not study college sport are also involved in these conversations about exploitation. McClearen (2021) takes this claim seriously in her analysis of the ways that female fighters in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) interact with and are made visible by the exploitative organizing bureaucracy. Kalman-Lamb (2018) explains the physical sacrifice required from National Hockey League (NHL) players to sustain the business of the sport. These works point to the ways that money-making institutions take advantage of the athletic labor expended by athletes, promoting a capitalist enterprise that physically, financially, mentally, and intellectually harms those who keep it going.

The NCAA is a foundational component of the U.S. collegiate sport system, which Goffman (1961) would theorize as a total institution. As total institutions are physical spaces where all needs are met within an enclosed area, college campuses fit this description. Additionally, sport scholars have applied the concept of a total institution to explain the structural organization of college sport (Hatteberg, 2018; Southall & Weiler, 2014). Thus, total institutions exist at multiple bureaucratic levels when considering college athletes: the NCAA, the universities, and the teams.

Actors act on behalf of a total institution to instill certain values and behaviors for those who contribute to it. In the athlete community, these actors include coaches, administrators, professors, the sports medicine staff, and the academic resource staff because individuals in these roles are responsible for the well-being of the amateur 'student-athletes,' in one way or another. Currently, the NCAA (2021a) asserts that:

> student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises. (p. 3)

However, amateurism is a narrative used by institutions to control athletes. It becomes so ingrained and taken for granted that athletes tend to embody and act it out themselves.

Examining the meaning of amateurism through Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides insight into the habits athletes internalize surrounding amateurism. Bourdieu (1984) described habitus as the underlying structure of social life that becomes ingrained in individuals as they move through the social world. It becomes so internalized that people begin to think that the way they move and act is natural, in part, because habitus is unconsciously created and reproduced. Turner (2018) further theorizes 'football habitus' to account for the ways that various disciplining and ordering elements become internalized as norms for athletes. While he is writing specifically about football players, Turner's argument that "through education, training, and discipline within the organizational field of football, a specific football habitus is fully integrated in athletics" (Turner, 2018, p. 71) can be applied to all athletes who participate in these total institutions.

Amateurism can be theorized as a dominant narrative that is used to discipline, order, and control athletes (Foucault, 1977). This idea is reinforced by actors who claim to uphold the values of the institutions. Accordingly, the notion of amateurism is used to inform athlete behavior, as it is meant to structure their

experiences as amateurs, not professional workers, while they spend their years in college.

The Use of Qualitative Methods to Understand Habitus of Athletic Departments

In this article, we draw on habitus to qualitatively examine the lived experiences of NCAA Division I athletes and to provide insight into athlete behavior in an institutionalized setting, specifically in relation to amateurism. Despite the changing politics that affect the process of conducting research (Giardina & Newman, 2014), the use of qualitative methods highlights our commitment as researchers to understand college athletes' lived experiences.

We are three social scientists from different disciplinary backgrounds who are all engaged in research projects with current and former college athletes from U.S. institutions of higher education. We have been able to see the issues that arise with the term "amateurism" because of the immersive time spent with different groups of athletes. One of us is an anthropologist and ethnographer who works with Black college football players to consider the ways they interact with various kin networks and geographies of care in their everyday lives. Another is a sociologist who utilizes interpretive methods to understand the meaning of health and illness (i.e., injury) among collegiate athletes. Our trio is rounded out by an educational and developmental psychologist who uses qualitative methods to explore the lived experiences of Black women athletes. As scholars often marginalized in our disciplines because of our focus on sport and college athletes, we recognized our similar struggles in our home disciplines and the value of our qualitative contributions to the study of NCAA Division I athletics and the experiences of college athletes.

In what follows, we show the exploitative effects of amateur status and offer a glimpse of how athletes must navigate the total institution that relies upon their designation as amateurs. To do so, we offer autoethnographic vignettes from our individual research experiences (Hurston, 2008[1935]; McClaurin, 2001). We rely on this particular approach because it allows for us to recognize that our own experiences while conducting research did impact the ways the work was carried out. As three women invested in different aspects of sport studies, we are also decentering dominant voices and recentering perspectives that are often marginalized. Through these narratives, we highlight our multiple qualitative methods and distinct disciplinary approaches to speak cohesively about a larger issue that impacted us all.

Of note is that we each had varied, yet similar, interactions with the institutional review board (IRB) at our home universities. This federally regulated group is tasked with approving human subjects research when a researcher intends to

systematically collect data to answer a research question. Though rightfully meant to protect the interests and well-being of those who might participate in academic research (Briggs, 2022), our experiences demonstrate that the IRB participated as another actor in the total institution that worked to insulate college athletes from others who might also be invested in their well-being.

Together these vignettes provide insight into the habitus of athletic departments and the challenges faced by college athletes, in a variety of contexts, as they navigate the various institutions that order and control their time, bodies, and labor.

Ethnographic Fieldwork with Black Football Players

I sat in the Cobb Football Center one August afternoon during summer training camp to chat with Carter, a redshirt junior. I wrote quick notes as we talked about his experiences at Mellon University, the name I use for the Division I institution where I spent most of my time while conducting fieldwork with Black college football players. Soon, though, I noticed that Carter was becoming hesitant with his answers. He had just mentioned his impending decision: should he stay for a fifth year on the team or choose to graduate this year?

Once he started talking through this choice, his eyes tracked from my paper to my pen up to my face. "Will you tell the coaches?" he asked. "What exactly are these notes for, again?"

I set my pen down and reiterated the plans for my research. I explained that I would always use a pseudonym to identify him and would never share notes with coaches, and reassured him that he could read anything he wanted before it was published. These answers seemed to assuage his concerns and we continued our conversation.

This moment with Carter speaks to a central concern expressed by the Black players I spent time with. His momentary hesitance was an embodied recognition that his own words could be used against him if the football program learned the information before he was ready. Their power and influence were far-reaching, Carter seemed to be telling me.

Ethnographic research requires what Rosaldo described as "deep hanging out" in order to fully immerse oneself in a specific social world on an informal level (Clifford, 1996, p. 5). An ethnographer must gain access to those social spaces and the people who inhabit them. However, while preparing for my research and during my year of fieldwork, I learned that institutional intervention could very directly impact my interactions with Black college football players. This recognition was not much different than what Carter was alluding to and it presented itself in various ways.

Messner and Musto (2014) recognize that dealing with university IRBs might be a reason why there is not much research done on young kids and sport participation. However, I experienced my own difficulties with this bureaucratic gatekeeper when trying to gain access to college athletes. My proposal for preliminary research was constantly tabled by the IRB at my graduate institution, for a range of reasons. After several rounds of back-and-forth, it became clear that the board would approve the proposal if I changed either my research population (if I wanted to stay at that place) or research site (if I wanted to work with football players). It took four months for this preliminary research to be approved and the final protocol was fundamentally different from what I originally proposed.

I was met with another challenge once I finally received permission from this ethics board to begin my year of fieldwork, several years later. The campus where I spent the majority of my time started the football season strong with four wins in a row. However, these wins were followed by six losses. Interestingly, these losses affected the level of access I was able to maintain: coaches and administrators stopped answering my phone calls and texts. As they worked through on-field issues, I was left wondering when, if ever, I would be able to spend time in the football facilities again. I was still in contact with players and our interactions continued in non-football-related spaces, but the football center, practice fields, and gyms were inaccessible.

As with many of the bureaucratic barriers I encountered during fieldwork, these two examples were unexpected, but quite telling. I learned the heightened position and visibility that football players hold on a college campus. These athletes have a complicated status, as certain interactions are demanded with professors, administrators, coaches, teammates, other athletes, classmates, and the media. Perhaps more importantly, these situations solidified the multiple ways college football players' time and behaviors are moderated by their teams. Sometimes consciously and other times unknowingly, these athletes are constantly in negotiation with their football programs and universities, attempting to navigate these institutions to the best of their abilities.

This was an important realization for me as an ethnographer. Despite my desire to interact with both athletics staff and academic administrators at Mellon, two bureaucratic entities that are imperative in the calculus that determines how athletes experience their time in college, my positioning as an outsider to this institution made this difficult. These different groupings of practitioners made it clear, in multiple ways, that they would control and monitor my access to the football players, even though I argued it was in the best interest of the athletes for us all to work together.

Experiences in Athlete Healthcare

Coming into graduate school I knew I wanted to work with collegiate athletes and study issues pertaining to this population. I applied and was hired to work in the athletics department, on the academic side, during my first year of graduate school so that I could build rapport among the athlete community. Working in the academic athletics center, I was given access to the building via an electronic swipe card. My job was to tutor and mentor athletes. In this space, I saw athletes clock in for their mandatory study hall hours, get help with their homework from tutors, discuss goals with mentors, and meet with academic advisors. This space acted as the 'student' side of the 'student-athlete.'

Two years into my program studying medical sociology, and working in athletics, I decided I wanted to study athlete experiences of injury. To better understand this, I needed access to the 'athlete' side of the 'student-athlete.' Specifically, I wanted to study interactions in the athletic training room. I submitted a protocol to the IRB and was approved. I discussed my IRB approval with multiple colleagues in the athletics department and was confronted by a superior who told me that I was the first person to ask to conduct research among athletes at the university. This prompted the creation of the "Athletics Research Committee" by administrators in the athletics department. Therefore, in addition to IRB approval, I was required to submit a proposal to the Athletics Research Committee. I proposed the same study that I had submitted to the IRB, which consisted of observations in the athletic training room, interviews with sports medicine staff members, interviews with injured athletes, and a survey to all athletes.

After five months, I received access from the Athletics Research Committee. I immediately began observations in the athletic training room. I would come to this space multiple times a week. Similar to getting access to the academic center, I would enter the athletic training room with an electronic swipe card. Here, I conducted observations and interviews with many of the sports medicine staff members (athletes were interviewed in the academic center).

One day, I met with a sports medicine staff member for an interview. They began by describing their role as a senior administrator for sports medicine research. I looked at them confused and replied, "I was told that I was the first person to conduct research among athletes at this university." I told them about the creation of the Athletics Research Committee and they told me they had never heard of it in their years conducting research with athletes at the university. They only went through the IRB to get permission for their research, which, to reiterate, I also had to do, in addition to submitting my proposal to the Athletics

Research Committee. This was shocking to me because waiting for the creation of the committee and for my proposal review significantly affected my project timeline.

After months of entering the athletic training room for observations and interviews, one day my electronic swipe card did not work. I emailed my contacts in the athletic training room but did not hear back. Eventually, I went to the front desk of the building and was told that unless I had an appointment, I was not able to get into the building. As a former NCAA Division I woman athlete, I had experience being a 'student-athlete,' however, I was now on a different side. In an attempt to speak to athletes about their experiences, I was shut out. This mission to gain access just to have it taken away highlights gatekeeping that is occurring in college athletics that makes it more difficult for athlete voices to be heard. It is crucial for athlete voices to be heard, especially for sports medicine practitioners, like athletic trainers, physical therapists, nutritionists, and sport psychologists, who care for college athletes.

Narrative Interviews with Black Women Athletes

In 2021, Black women made up less than 12% of all Division I women athletes (NCAA, 2021b). As a former Division I Black woman athlete myself, I entered my graduate studies intent on conducting research that centered on the lived experiences of Black women athletes. However, I quickly realized that while there continues to be a dearth of research that explicitly focuses on the Black woman athlete, I would have to navigate a variety of barriers before I would have the opportunity to move forward with this work. Given my research focus on Black women college athletes, the IRB used the guise of NCAA rules around amateurism to control and limit who was and was not able to gain access to this historically excluded and underrepresented group of athletes. It was only after multiple emails, conversations, proposal revisions, and required approval letters from top athletic administrators that interviews with athletes were able to begin.

Once the project was underway, I observed that many of the athletes I spoke with often mentioned the importance of having coaches who supported and cared about their development within and outside of their sport. This sentiment was shared among many of the women and highlighted the importance of having coaches who support the holistic development of their athletes. Nevertheless, while many athletes qualitatively indicated how much of a positive impact many of their coaches had on their overall development, they also noted that they encountered many coaches who left them feeling dehumanized. There is a long-standing body of research that points to the important role that coaches have on athletes' sense of belonging, motivation, athletic performance, and more (Kim & Cruz, 2016; Outlaw & Toriello, 2014). However, positive coaching

practices are not always adopted by college coaches, which can lead to athletes disengaging from their sport or the team. In instances where athletes felt they were not being seen as people, they often were hesitant to speak out against their coaches out of a fear of retaliation or jeopardizing their athletics scholarship or position on the team.

Relatedly, many of the Black women athletes I worked with highlighted the way that athletics changed for them as they entered the collegiate space. In particular, for many of the women, athletics shifted from being a space where they were playing primarily for the love of the game to being a space where they were just a piece of a larger business and expendable when they no longer had value to the institution. For example, one woman I spoke with had a brother who warned her about the way she would be treated by coaches and the athletics department if she was not able to perform up to their expected standards. His warning, while not unfounded, ultimately shaped the way she entered and moved through her collegiate environment. As she and other women I spoke with transitioned to college, they often intentionally sought out institutions and teams that would value them beyond their athletics statistics.

As I reflect on my experience conducting this research, I am left wondering: What additional evidence-based coaching practices could college coaches implement in order to more readily create environments that allow Black women athletes to thrive? What do researchers have to gain from working directly with coaches of Black women athletes? And, how can both coaches and researchers help foster environmental contexts that allow athletes to be able to openly share what they need? Black women athletes are experts of their own lived experiences, and researchers and practitioners should work together to help create a positive environment that aids in development. Through building lasting and meaningful partnerships between researchers and athletic departments, including athletes and staff, athletes' holistic development can be better supported.

Suggestions for Practitioners

Based on our research experiences, presented here through vignettes, we offer three suggestions for how to inform programming for college athletes.

First, athletic departments would benefit from an active partnership with qualitative researchers on their own campuses, perhaps allowing for athletics staff to build upon qualitative research to create and fund tangible experiences and resources. Not only would our research be better supported if we were able to work with athletic departments, but the college athlete experience would be improved if departments were presented with tangible data to show where resources might be useful. We recognize this as an innovative approach, as we encourage these departments to utilize research from a variety of disciplines and

frameworks that can help to provide a more holistic representation of the athlete experience. By centering athletes in our research design and collaborating across university departments, new ideas will flourish. This kind of relationship, which brings together often siloed departments, would both enhance research findings and translate research into actionable measures (see Figure 1).

Second, we suggest that athletic departments are included in research during the proposal process, so they know what will be carried out and will have already agreed to it. The goal is to engage in conversation with athletic departments before the research has started and throughout the research process to create an integrative and collaborative relationship. We anticipate this inclusion will lead to mutual investment from all participants.

Third, as a nod to those scholars who are engaged in applied and public scholarship, we suggest that research with college athletes is published beyond academic journals and disseminated in an accessible manner so that it can be read and understood by the various parties invested in athlete well-being. Podcasts, op-eds, public talks, televised interviews, and infographics are all appropriate means of communication that would broaden the public audiences with access to this information.

Unlike academicians, practitioners are present in the day-to-day lives and activities of athletes as they navigate athletic space. Because of their sustained engagement, we argue that it is important for people in the sports industry to incorporate research-informed practices when working with and alongside the athletes in their care. In order to center the athletes themselves and create an environment in which they thrive, we need to consider them holistically. This inevitably involves the collaboration of practitioners and academicians, who all have valuable insights and understandings of different, yet interconnected, aspects of their experiences.

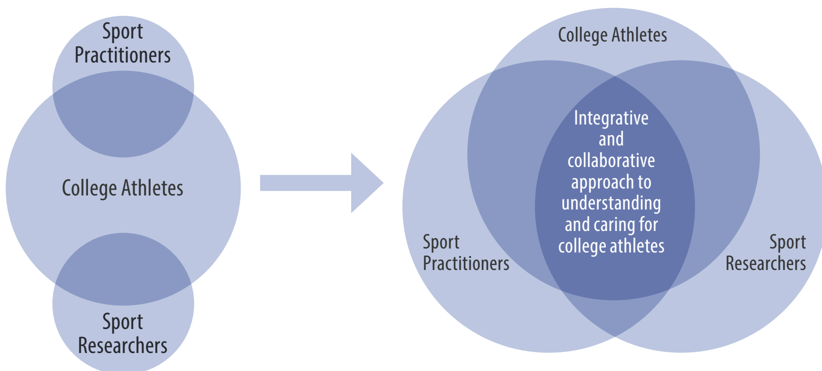

Figure 1. Relationship between collegiate athletes, practitioners, and researchers.

Figure 1 shows, on the left, the current relationship between sport practitioners and researchers. While both are involved in the lives of college athletes, practitioners and researchers are siloed from each other. The right of the figure shows the future relationship between college athletes, practitioners, and researchers, which highlights an integrative approach to better understanding, and caring for, athletes.

Conclusions

Through these vignettes, we provide insight into the habitus of athletic departments and athletes who labor within them. We highlight issues with access (including constant renegotiation, interactions with IRBs, and limited access to certain populations) and interference from gatekeepers who are tasked with protecting athletes against "exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises" (NCAA, 2021a, p. 3). However, these gatekeepers mobilize amateurism as a narrative to discipline this particular student population and take advantage of their free athletic labor. We recognize that these gatekeepers who act on behalf of total institutions include the NCAA, IRBs, administrators in athletic departments, and those who hold power within the university structure. For example, one of the ways gatekeeping is performed is through IRB restrictions on how and when researchers are able to work with college athletes. These IRB practices have direct implications for the way researchers are able to (or not) have conversations with and spend time with college athletes.

While we approach our work from different disciplinary lenses, we argue that our qualitative research can be used to speak to the lived experiences of college athletes in intimate and tangible ways. We have discussed, though, how gaining access to teams and athletes often entails several bureaucratic barriers. Moreover, the theoretical use of habitus allows us to see not only how the culture of college sport and the understanding of amateurism is exploitative of athletes and has been used to order them, but also how we belong to these total institutions as researchers at member universities. Additionally, as graduate students, we were limited in our ability to gain access to athletes, in comparison to those who had been affiliated with our universities for longer periods of time. In part, we argue that seniority should not be the deciding factor for who should be allowed to conduct research with athletes on university campuses. Instead, this access should be attributed to those who are committed to understanding the athlete experience from their own perspective, with the goal of bettering athlete experiences on campuses. Because of these varied experiences, we are able to make suggestions for practitioners; we should all be in conversation.

We support an integrative approach that facilitates conversations between athletes, researchers, practitioners, athletics staff, and the public who all are, in

some way, invested in the athletic labor of unpaid college athletes. This kind of approach would disrupt gatekeeping barriers so that relationships could be more participatory in nature. This would also benefit qualitative researchers' work to directly inform programming. The hope is that this integrative approach would take the relationship between athletics and academics on college campuses more seriously, keeping the experiences of athletes at the forefront.

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