

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Media Magic of Michael Jordan *

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With basketball in full swing, we see and hear more about Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls. There is nothing wrong with that. However, the media tends to endow Michael Jordan with physical strength and dexterity that is almost magical. In contrast, white sports stars are portrayed with less natural talent. They are depicted as having to work harder to be successful.



This seemingly harmless racial myth seriously influences the occupational choices of black youth. Recent generations tend to select professional sports as their only career choice. The Center for the Study of Sport and Society did a recent study of inner city youth, ages 13-18. Almost 70% indicated professional sports as their first career choice. Considering that only 1,400 African-American men have contracts in professional football, basketball and baseball, this is an extremely impractical goal. The 1,400 are few when compared to the multitude who aspire to fill those positions.

Psychologist Othello Harris (Miami University of Ohio) researched these racial stereotypes in the media. Harris has divided this stereotyping into three main themes.

- **White men can't jump.** A basketball coach from a midwestern university was interviewed after a game. His team had beaten a predominantly black team, even though he had three white players who couldn't

"jump over the local telephone book." The coach said his team had won by intelligent playing. However, when discussing his smartest athletes, no African-American players were mentioned.

- **White men can't run either.** Recently, in *Runner's World* magazine, an editorial said that blacks dominate sprinting and distance races over whites. The magazine said that this is due to a genetic advantage. West Africans are endowed with more speed, while East Africans have inherited more endurance. Harris notes that even these stereotypes change. About 30 years ago, *Sports Illustrated* argued that blacks are accomplished sprinters but second-rate distance runners.

- **White guys can think.** About five years ago, *Sports Illustrated* polled NBA coaches and managers to name the smartest basketball players in the league. The Boston Celtics star, Larry Bird, ranked first. He was followed by John Stockton of the Utah Jazz. Both are white. No African-American player made the top five.

Advertisements emphasize the athletic abilities of African-American players, but downplay intellectual abilities. They are portrayed as more suited for the court than the boardroom. In print ads, black athletes are seen with slogans like, "Basketball is the life. The rest is just details." or "The game doesn't end." The media tends to ignore off-the-court intellectual ventures of black athletes. For example, have you heard about Shaquille O'Neil, an NBA star, going back to college to get his degree?

The media also tend to emphasize the big money in sports careers. I'm sure sports fans have heard of the multi-million dollar salaries commanded by Michael Jordan... or baseball's Albert Belle... or the multisport

talent, Deion Sanders. However, the media fail to note that only a few players are paid such salaries. About 95% of NBA players must find jobs after their basketball careers end. When they retire from the sport, about 81% of them are bankrupt.

Jeffrey Holmes is a doctoral student in counseling psychology at Pasadena City College, who finds that young African-American men are affected by this media distortion. *"What I'm finding out is that beyond athletics, our kids don't have any identity of their own."* He sees many young men clad entirely in clothes with the emblems of a professional team. Many college athletes expect to make it in professional sports. Holmes sees their chances as *"slim to none."*

Psychologist Gary Sailes (Indiana University) provides life-skills training to high school and college athletes. He is also a career consultant to professional tennis and basketball players. Sailes did a nationwide survey of 1,100 high school and college football and basketball players. He found some unsettling facts about African-American players.

- Rather than academic reasons, almost all of them chose a particular college, because it offered a better chance of being drafted into the pro leagues.
- Most study only enough to maintain eligibility to play. If possible, they would enter the draft before graduation.
- If they were drafted before graduation, only 27% say they would return to school to get their degree.

Other information compiled by Sailes indicated that graduates have greater success than those who don't graduate. Eight years after they graduate, athletes are more likely to have jobs and own their own home. They also have a greater sense of self-esteem and confidence.

**Student athletes need to be advised that
they have other options available
after – or instead of – professional sports."**

Sailes believes that counselors who work with student athletes need to make them aware of these findings. They have more career options than they think. Their sports skills can be used in other occupations.

"Going after a pro career is one thing, but the athletic skills they learn on the field are very important in life. They already know about hard work.... What we need to do is help these athletes... make what I consider prudent, realistic and rational decisions about their careers."

* Adapted from Rebecca A. Clay's "Psychologists help debunk the myth of Michael Jordan," [*The APA Monitor*](#), November, 1997, page 29.