

ATHLETES TRANSCENDING RACE: HOW IS IT POSSIBLE?

by Richard E. Lapchick

I have worked on college campuses for nearly 35 years as a professor, a civil rights activist and as an author on issues of race and sport. I see white students, faculty and administrators cheer for African-American student-athletes. I see images of those same student-athletes on posters in stores and on the walls of white students' dorms. That makes it even more troubling to me that our college campuses today are the third biggest site for hate crimes in America; that nearly 1 million bias incidents take place on our campuses each year; that some white college students thought that it was funny and fun to dress in black face during Halloween parties last October and have a mock lynching of a black student.

We do not need to see Klansmen walking in robes on our campuses to learn how to hate. The internet, which provides us with so many wonderful things, also has more than 600 hate sites where we can learn to hate another person based on what they look like, where they are from, or what they believe in. All this stands in stark contrast to the posters of African-American student-athletes or white students cheering in the stands at basketball and football games where African-American student-athletes lead the play.

These are among the reasons why we often ask the question, "What is it about sport that helps some black athletes transcend the issue of race?"

The comeback of Michael Jordan in the 2001-2002 NBA season reminds me of a survey once done of people walking along Venice Beach in California. They were shown two photos and asked which one they recognized first. One was depicting Jesus Christ while the other was the back of Michael Jordan's bald head. The fact that the more people said that they recognized the photo of Michael Jordan tells us a lot about our society. He is even more recognizable today with his sensational comeback.

What is it that makes so many white Americans buy into commercials telling them that they want to be like Mike? Does this mean that he has really transcended the issue of race? Does Tiger Woods success in transforming an all-white sport into one that seems to embrace him as the #1 superstar mean that race has been transcended in that sport and we are working in a new society?

Those thoughts can be abruptly halted when we read stories about athletes who get in trouble with the law, athletes who commit crimes of sexual assault or are arrested for drug abuse. Each time an athlete is arrested, I get phone calls from the media asking me, "What is it about athletes that make them more inclined to be drug users, sexual predators" or whatever the crime is.

The fact that those questions are asked regularly about basketball and football players but rarely about hockey or baseball players who may have an equal number of arrests on the books tells me that we continue to stereotype African-American athletes in these politically correct times. We should not forget that the African-American athlete who was described as the first to transcend the issue of race is now viewed with scorn and derision by the same generation which may have had his poster on their wall when they were growing up.

O.J. Simpson was the first African-American athlete to be widely used in commercial and endorsements deals, to star in movies and seemingly be accepted into the homes of white people around the country. Now O.J. Simpson is described as the African-American athlete who most divides the races in America. That is being said as though the races were once together. Why did O.J. have this appeal so many years ago? Was it his incredible ability on the field combined with good looks and a complete absence of public political consciousness?

What makes white Americans want to be like Michael Jordan? Is it Jordan's greatness combined with a constant smile and an unwillingness to delve into controversial issues such as racism that makes him so beloved across racial lines?

What makes some white Americans afraid that our children will want to be like Allen Iverson or Barry Bonds? What is it about Iverson or Bonds that makes some whites a little bit scared of them? Is it that Iverson is more hip-hop than the mainstream white culture, that Bonds is not a smiling face? What is it about Tiger Woods that makes us embrace him and at the same time let his counterparts in tennis, Venus and Serena Williams, seem to be far less loved and embraced? Is it Tiger's brilliance on the course? His charm? Or is it that he has remained on the sidelines regarding social and political issues? Is it that the Williams sisters are so physically powerful and braid their hair? Is it that they talk about racism when most athletes have not been able to do so without paying a heavy price.

Have we really transcended race when African-American athletes are unable to speak out for fear that their careers will come to an abrupt end or that they will not get endorsement deals? As a social activist, I know that it has been hard to get athletes to speak out on social issues. They are justifiably afraid that doing so will cost them their job or their endorsements. Those who have tried have paid a severe price.

Tiger Woods learned about the consequences soon after his first Masters victory in 1997. The golf world did not know how to react to Tiger's first Nike commercial when a universally negative response instantly followed its release. So there was Tiger Woods, fresh out of the blocks, saying that he could not play on the courses of many country clubs. He asked, "Are you ready for me, world?"

The press responded in one of two ways. The first was that Tiger could play anywhere he wanted so why was he complaining. Of course, he could. However, I think that Tiger was referring to people who looked like him but were not named Tiger Woods. Too many could not play on too many courses. The second response was that he let NIKE exploit him to sell products to African-Americans. It seemed to me at the time that any market for golf gear for African-Americans was very small. If it increased even 100 fold, it would not even make a blip on NIKE's enormous bottom line.

But talking about race and golf could hurt NIKE's sales to its overwhelmingly white customer base who at best ignored existing racial barriers in golf. Tiger was the first athlete I ever saw make a comment about race in a commercial and he got RIPPED, badly.

Tiger seemed to learn a lesson there. It is a lesson that I wished he and other athletes had not learned. No more political issues! We are always ready to tear down sports heroes at a moments notice. Tiger was not about to let that happen and did not. His new \$100 million NIKE contract was just one reward.

That being said, there is a case of an athlete formerly despised by many whites who is now embraced by them. Does his example demonstrate that when athletes speak out for the principles they believe in, their place in history will eventually be secure? But in this case, it surely took time, going all the way back to the tumultuous 1960s when Muhammad Ali was the sports equivalent of Malcolm X in the tempest over the issue of race. Thirty-five years later, Ali is the most sought after athlete in the history of sport.

Soon after becoming heavyweight champion, Ali became a Black Muslim. White America, then so fearful of Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, rejected Ali. His subsequent refusal to join the Army during the Vietnam War widened the rift between himself and mainstream America. The international embrace of Muhammad Ali, which began with the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, brings that hope that an athlete can transcend race. Ali had been designated several years ago as the United Nations' Messenger of Peace.

I cannot imagine any public figure who could have had the same impact after September 11th when there were hundreds of reports of anti-Muslim incidents in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Ali appeared in the first benefit concert for the victims and reminded the world that he also represented the face of Muslims, that Islam was a religion of love and peace. The number of incidents plummeted as America came even more together as a team.

There had always been a huge racial divide in our country. Ali's life shows us how bridges can be built. Ali obviously had an amazing athletic career and, finally, became beloved by the same public which once viewed him as being terribly divisive.

The legacy of Ali includes publicly demonstrating his pride as a black man, emphasizing boldly that race does matter as no other athlete has done so forcefully before or since. He was accused of dividing the races because he stood so tall as a black American. Ali now brings people of all racial groups together by preaching "healing" and appealing to everyone, irrespective of their race, religion or age. He has really transcended our differences.

After September 11th, we are now more cautious about using the term hero for sports figures. For me, Ali has earned the title because of the leadership he has given to us. His story shows how the American public can come to truly embrace a hero irrespective of race and welcome his stand on principle.

On almost any given Sunday I can turn on the TV and see the smiling Tiger Woods tearing up a course or the handsome Michael Jordan weaving his magic around the rim. I love to watch them and appreciate that we are in an era in which white America barely sees that they happen to be African-American.

I wish they would speak out but understand why they do not. Maybe they will someday see that they can be like Muhammad: be great, smile, and confront the important issues. If they do that and white America barely sees that they happen to be African-American but recognizes them as human beings fighting for justice, then we will really be somewhere as a society.

The fact that this has happened in the case of Muhammad Ali tells me that his example highlights the real meaning of an athlete transcending race.

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