

## Race and Hoops Everyday



Y'all scared of playing them white boys.

Over the three years that I played basketball for Aurora University, we never had more than four white players on our team; but those players were key to our team's success. When they failed to perform in pivotal games, often against opponents whose players were predominantly black, then my black teammates and I sought explanations rooted in stereotypes. A black teammate of mine once said, "The white boys get scared every time we play a black team." I agreed, although I had little grounds on which to evaluate his judgments of our "scared" white teammates. Maybe it was just a "feeling" we had. No doubt, this "feeling" was rooted in our belief that blacks were natural athletes and whites were not.<sup>1</sup> We thought of our white teammates as crafty, intelligent, and skilled shooters, whereas we thought of ourselves as quicker, stronger, and more aggressive than they were. How could we think otherwise? Everything we had been exposed to, including media representations of black athletes, told us we were better built for the game of basketball.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes these explanations of black athletic superiority were laced with creative arguments about physiological makeup. Whether blacks were indeed superior athletes or not, both we and our white teammates believed it to be true.<sup>3</sup> Race did matter to us. Thus, it was easy for us to surmise that our white teammates became intimidated when faced with the prospect of competing against black players, whom we all thought were superior athletes. We had learned that "white men can't jump" and that "blacks were bred to be physically superior."

For the young men involved with the Northeast Knights, issues of race are very real. Racial issues run subtly through the core of the

boys' and men's lives on a day-to-day basis. Occasionally, however, the men and boys talk explicitly about the ways in which race affects their lives. What follows is a sampling of the players' and coaches' discussions when race was made explicit. First, I examine the players' views of athletic ability at the nexus of race and social environment and how these views generally challenge conventional wisdom about race and athletic ability. Second, I explore the coaches' experiences with race and racism to understand how historical experiences influence the way they come to view issues of race and how these issues play out in the young men's lives.

I argue that race is the theme that underlies many of the adult and young men's interpretations of their basketball experiences. The coaches, because they have played in racially hostile environments, understand the racial tensions that can arise and, therefore, are in a position to influence how the young men interpret similar situations. The young men's experiences, however, have occurred within a different context for interracial interaction, and therefore the players have their own interpretation of the relationship among race, social environment, and athletic ability. I demonstrate that the young men—rather than being swayed by conventional wisdom that grants superior athletic ability to blacks—indicate that although race may be a factor in athletic success, hard work is far more important.

I propose three reasons for the young men's alternative views that work against stereotypical assertions about the relationship between race and athletic ability: (1) the players interact with white athletes who share skills and abilities comparable to their own; (2) the players have been insulated from structural factors that raise racial distinctions to greater salience; and (3) the players have embraced a sense of meritocracy within their own athletic setting. In the end, the young men's competitive experiences with whites and others help to support their belief that with hard work they can make it to the next level. These perceptions are set within the context of the adult men's understandings of the racialized past politics of athletic participation for blacks in Northeast. These experiences form the foundation for my inquiry into race and basketball for the young men of Northeast.

### Is It Your 'Hood or Your Race?

Public debate about the physical superiority of athletes based on racial categories has been ongoing. Despite the fact that race has been accepted by many as little more than a social construction, our belief in racial categories continues to have profound consequences for how we view ourselves and others.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the conclusions drawn by those who make arguments about the physical superiority of black athletes have influenced the self-image of many young black boys. The notion of black athletic superiority, coupled with the proliferation of successful black athletes, has conditioned many young men, in particular those individuals most disenfranchised from legitimate opportunity, to view sports as a viable means of escaping poverty.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, individuals who associate a certain natural athletic ability to a particular racial group are likely to evaluate their own ability on the basis of such stereotypes.

The extent to which Americans use race as a proxy for athletic ability cannot be overstated. Many individuals view the black athlete as superior to other athletes. The overrepresentation of blacks in sports that require what many consider the most important athletic attributes—speed, leaping ability, and agility—reinforces the notion of black males as “natural” athletes.<sup>6</sup> The high representation of blacks in professional basketball and at the positions requiring attributes like speed in football impresses on many people the legitimacy of the natural black athlete. These frames of understanding have a subtle place in the minds of the Northeast Knights. For instance, in the following fieldnote, Mr. Thompson, a father of two of our former players, who acted as a conditioning coach over two seasons, questions the players' commitment to athletic success. Beyond his questions about desire for athletic success, he invokes race as part of the equation. Specifically, he questions the players' ability and desire vis-à-vis white athletes.

*I was waiting in the vestibule with B.T., Turo, David, and Pooty Cat. The guys were unwinding after riding all the way home from Nimrod County with little discussion. Nimrod had unexpectedly beaten us. We had the more talented team but did not play well enough to win. Mr. Thompson said, “It don't bother y'all to get your ass whipped?” He was obviously upset. All the players standing around me said, “Yeah.”*

*Mr. Thompson said to Turo, “I thought you said your senior class was*

different." [He was referring to the fact that Turo, like seniors in each previous class, had vowed that they would be better than the class before them.]

Turo said, "It's still early in the season."

Mr. Thompson said, "Why don't you do something to make the season better? Why don't you have yourself in shooting practice tomorrow at 7:00 a.m.? I can't understand why the guys who are shooting half the shots are not even coming to shooting practice. You need to come to shooting practice. Will you be at shooting practice tomorrow?"

Turo didn't say anything. Mr. Thompson said, "You need to have your ass in practice." Turo still didn't respond. Mr. Thompson was becoming angrier as he began to realize the promise that we had failed to achieve. He asked the players, "Are y'all scared?"

"No," they replied in unison.

Mr. Thompson said, "Y'all get scared of playing them white boys just like you did in football?"

"What white boys?" Turo asked.

"The ones that beat y'all ass," replied Mr. Thompson. "You just got up there and got scared."

B.T. recalled, "Oh, yeah, he talking about West Farmington."

While all this was going on, I was thinking about intervening, but I decided against it. I thought that Mr. Thompson was being a little hard on the players. I turned off the gym lights and shut the door and we left.

Although Mr. Thompson questioned the general commitment of the players, his use of the phrase "y'all scared of playing them white boys" greatly shifted the emphasis of his critique of the players' efforts. By invoking race as a contributing factor to the players' poor performance, Mr. Thompson was calling into question not only the players' commitment but also their ability to face competition from whites. The insult in this statement is grounded in the taken-for-granted understanding that white athletes are less capable than black athletes. Thompson assumes that the stereotypical ability of black athletes, in and of itself, should bolster the players' confidence when competing against predominantly white teams. Yet he also insists that they must work. Thompson's challenge to the Northeast players is just one more suggestion to the players that black athletes are superior to white athletes and should therefore have little trouble prevailing.

Young men, like the Northeast Knights, are constantly bombarded

with the rhetoric of black athletes as superior to white athletes. For instance, on June 10, 2004, Larry Bird, a white, former NBA and Hall of Fame player, made statements regarding the superiority of black athletes on an ESPN talk show. When asked whether the NBA lacked white superstars, Bird remarked,

Well, I think so. . . . You know, when I played, you had me and Kevin [McHale] and some others throughout the league. I think it's good for a fan base because, as we all know, the majority of the fans are white America. And if you just had a couple of white guys in there, you might get them a little excited. But it is a black man's game, and it will be forever. I mean, the greatest athletes in the world are African-American.<sup>7</sup>

Bird subsequently added that during his playing days he found it "disrespectful" to him and his abilities when another white player was assigned to defend him. Bird's comments stand as just another affirmation to young males that blacks are indeed superior athletes.

Both Larry Bird's comments and Coach Thompson's criticisms of the Knights' performance raise an interesting question: do the young men themselves believe race to be a determining factor in athletic ability? During the interviews with the young men, I posed this question and an interrelated one. The first question was, "Does where an individual grows up determine whether he will be a good athlete?" This question attempts to explore the young men's understanding of the social processes involved in developing an individual's athletic ability. Their responses to this question were often related to the neighborhood social conditions that reflect social class and race. The second question was, "Does one's race matter as to whether an individual will be a good athlete?" This question attempts to understand the extent to which the young men emphasize race as key to athletic ability. Although these two questions were presented as distinct considerations, the players' responses were very much interrelated, given the fact that their neighborhood experience was also an exclusively black experience.<sup>8</sup> For many of the young men it was rare that they had an opportunity to personally assess whites' athletic ability prior to their own interracial competition with whites. Typically, this competition first occurred in racially integrated middle schools, where the young

black men were in direct competition with whites for playing time on their middle school teams or in tournaments against white players from other schools.

In general, the players believed that one's neighborhood has some influence on becoming a good athlete but that one's race has little to do with the potential for an individual to become a good athlete. Still, the young men had nuanced perceptions of the impact of race and neighborhood on becoming a good athlete. The players' statements provide valuable insight. For instance, Danny, a frequently used substitute, shared the following:

*May:* Does where you come from have anything to do with whether you are a good athlete or not? Like where you live? Where you grow up?

*Danny:* It's got something to do with it. But just because you are from there [a particular neighborhood] don't mean you're automatically going to be good.

*May:* Like, how do you mean when you say, "it has something to do with it"?

*Danny:* Like, if somebody, like in your neighborhood—if everybody playing basketball, you're going to get up, you're going to want to play too. So you're going to do what's around you.

*May:* Does your race matter about whether you will be a good athlete or not?

*Danny:* Naw.

*May:* Naw. You don't think so?

*Danny:* No. [He shakes his head.]

Danny recognizes that one's social setting influences the frequency with which one is exposed to certain activities. In this case, basketball is a prominent activity for the young men in his neighborhood. When his peers play, Danny plays. He is, therefore, able to refine his skill as a player who can shoot and to maximize his own athletic ability through constant training. On the other hand, Danny suggests that race in and of itself has no impact on whether one becomes a good athlete. His belief is no doubt influenced by the fact that Danny played against white players during his time at Northeast High School and had an opportunity to witness that some of those white players were both skilled and outstanding athletes.

For instance, when we played North Farmington during Danny's senior year, two of the early baskets of the game for North Farmington were scored when one of their white players slam-dunked the basketball—generally considered the most athletic move in basketball. Later in that same game, the North Farmington team combined for two alley-oop slam-dunks. The slam-dunks in this game were defining moments of white male athletic ability for some of our players, and a secondary affirmation for others who had already become aware that "white men can jump."

It is easy to imagine the basketball courts in the hills of North Farmington filled with young white boys trying to develop their skills and athletic ability in much the same way that the young boys of Northeast spend their time on the playgrounds. The impact of the environment is not lost on the players, especially those players from areas where the leisure time they have is spent competing in sports. Cerico, a player who grew up in the densely populated housing project of Hillside, learned to deal with tough competition among other players. Because there was only one court to play on and the winning team remained on the court at the conclusion of each game, the games were intensely competitive. During Cerico's interview, he made the following observations when I asked whether social environment mattered:

*Cerico:* Oh, yeah. 'Cause see, like, say you're playing in Hillside housing projects. Man, you going be more tougher and more—just more hard, man. Like, if you play that driveway ball, you be, like, you be out there by yourself, and your daddy just tell you to shoot. That ain't nothing. In Hillside you learn how it is [when you compete aggressively with others].

*May:* Well, does whether someone is black, white, Chinese, Hispanic have anything to do with athletic ability?

*Cerico:* Naw. If you can play, you can play, in my eyes. Honestly.

Cerico makes a distinction between the social environment of playing driveway ball and competing on the courts in Hillside. Cerico's use of the term "driveway ball" refers to the notion that suburban youths spend time shooting baskets in the solitude of their driveways. Conversely, true players spend time in competitive play on the playground, with the assumption being that such competition makes a better player.

Although Cerico concludes that one's race matters little as to whether one becomes a good athlete, I would argue that, to some degree, the social environments that produce good athletes are in fact racialized environments. Given the levels of segregation and the cultural attitudes developed in densely populated urban areas, where basketball is frequently played, players from these areas develop certain skills. The players that hail from these areas are disproportionately black. Thus, whereas some people attribute race as a biologically pre-determining factor of athletic ability, I would argue that race as a social, rather than biological, construct has consequences that are significant as to whether individuals develop athletic ability. For instance, since there are far more blacks living in segregated and densely populated areas like Hillside than there are whites living in such areas, it is more likely that blacks are exposed to the kind of competitive playing environment that requires them to master control over their bodies in order to be successful. Thus, those athletes who spend time playing are developing reflexes and movements that enhance their physical abilities. The culture of competition in Hillside is one in which players emphasize aggressive aspects of the game and individualized showmanship. Indeed, it is such attributes that have come to be greatly appreciated by those who are spectators of professional basketball.

Unfortunately, the more time that players spend emphasizing these aspects of their game, the less time they spend developing fundamental skills like shooting. Some sports commentators have argued that because the media have highlighted the individualized showmanship—or, some would say, showboating—of athletic moves like the slam-dunk, aspects of playground basketball have undermined the sport itself. In fact, some have attributed the influx of foreign-born players into the NBA to the fact that they are attending basketball academies and learning fundamental skills, which make them more effective, albeit less entertaining, than basketball players from the United States.

Although most Northeast players believe that the social environment is key for whether an individual becomes a good athlete, some players believe that individual effort has a more profound effect on athletic outcomes. As Terry pointed out, "It's not necessarily where you grow up. It just depends on how hard you work at what you do. If you love what you do, you'll work at it. And eventually you'll get better."

Recall that Cerico commented that playing in Hillside would make one a better player than if one practiced alone in the driveway. He suggested that the social environment in which a player participates is essential to a player's success. Alternatively, Terry emphasized that individual desire and practice is an important determinant for athletic success. In Terry's way of thinking, a player who works at "driveway ball," although it is a solitary activity, can excel in basketball. Perhaps Terry's belief in such an approach is bolstered by the fact that he himself frequently worked in solitude and was able to become an outstanding two-sport athlete.

One of the key ideas that flow from the foregoing discussion is the extent to which players believe that one must work to achieve the goal of being a good athlete. For the players, the race of an individual has little to do with an individual's desire to work at being successful. Rather, the players generally believe that any individual who has achieved success as an athlete has had the drive, work ethic, and talent to achieve. The players' understandings of the relationships between hard work, social environment, and natural talent demonstrate a certain level of awareness. For this reason, many of the players are able to accept as a possibility the notion of naturally talented white athletes. Lionel, a starter during his senior year, gave the following example:

*May:* Do you think somebody's race has anything to do with whether they are considered a good athlete or not?

*Lionel:* Not necessarily—it's all on them. I mean, they say white boys can't jump. But I have seen some white boys that can jump! [I laugh.]

*May:* Name one? Who was that?

*Lionel:* I remember a couple of years ago, in my freshman year in high school, this white boy named John—this is when D. Benson was down here—he was playing on the varsity, but he didn't play because he had to transfer to Queens High School. 'Cause he was, like, he was going to get some time. He could jump. He was about 6'1", 6'2". He was gonna be D. Benson's back-up point guard.

Lionel makes the statement "it's all on them" to suggest two aspects of athletic ability. One aspect is the natural talent of an individual—the extent to which the individual is born with ability. The second is that

the individual must take the time to develop that ability. Thus, it is "on them" as to whether they live up to their potential.

Initially, I was surprised by Lionel's remarks that he believed "white men could jump." When I asked him to name a player, my question was partly rhetorical and partly in jest. Since we only had one white player on the Northeast Knights during the time that Lionel played, I believed it would be difficult for Lionel to "name one." To my surprise, he identified John. Perhaps if Lionel had not remembered John, he still could have easily made reference to white players, like those slam-dunking white players from North Farmington, who would prove accurate examples of white males who were excellent athletes.

Although to some observers the players might seem to exhibit a naiveté regarding physiological differences between individuals and across groups, they exhibit an understanding of the complex ways in which natural ability and the nurturing of that ability are interrelated. Joco demonstrates this understanding:

*Joco:* It doesn't matter where you from. If you got the talent, then it really doesn't matter. You got to use it.

*May:* Where do you get the talent from?

*Joco:* Hard work. Everybody has basic skills, but you got to work hard to get everything together.

*May:* Do you think race has anything to do with whether you—somebody considers you a good athlete or not?

*Joco:* In some cases—I figure some people think African Americans are just athletes anyway—in some cases, yeah.

*May:* You said that people say African Americans are good athletes. I mean, so, do you ever play against any Chinese kids who [I begin to smile] were good athletes?

*Joco:* Yeah. I have actually.

*May:* What about whites? White kids?

*Joco:* Yeah. They can play. If you got it, you got it.

*May:* Is it skill or is it like natural ability—when you think about a good athlete?

*Joco:* Uh, I guess natural ability. Those I've played against. Like, going to the park, they were good.

Joco's comments indicate a nuanced understanding of those with athletic ability. He suggests that everyone has "basic skills," or that they

are born with certain abilities. These abilities, however, must be enhanced through hard work. Perhaps what is most interesting about Joco's comments is the extent to which he considers that natural ability runs throughout human populations and exists in various individuals across racial categories. For instance, he shares the conventional knowledge that "some people think African Americans are just athletes anyway." Here he suggests that this is not a personal belief of his but that his own beliefs are contrary to the notion of blacks as superior athletes. Joco's observations are made more compelling because he then goes on to give examples of having played with athletes from different racial and ethnic groups who he felt were naturally talented. For Joco, an individual's ability is something that he or she is born with, that exists throughout the human population, and that must be developed.

Whereas Joco rejects the notion that certain races are more likely to be good athletes than others, Tommy has a different take on the role of race in determining an athlete's abilities. Tommy's background is worth mentioning since it is different from the typical young man who competes for the Northeast Knights. Tommy and his brother David have lived with both parents since they were born, and their father played professional football for a few years. Tommy grew up playing sports at the recreation center and learned of his athletic ability at an early age. By high school not only did Tommy's basketball teammates recognize him as an excellent athlete, but his senior class at Northeast High School also voted him most athletic. Both Tommy and David experienced post-high-school athletic success (each went on to play college football at a major NCAA Division I university). Perhaps it is Tommy's middle-class family background that gives him a view that is more consistent with conventional wisdom about race and athletic ability. Tommy and David are the only two young men interviewed who stated definitively that race was significant as to whether a player would be considered a good athlete. Tommy provided the following view of race, genes, and social environment:

*May:* Do you think where you live or where you grow up has anything to do with whether you are going to be a good athlete or not?

*Tommy:* Not really. 'Cause like, when I first started playing I was told that the people from, like, Eastridge would be better [than people

from the middle-class neighborhood of Cedarton] because they were harder or whatever. You know, but I was just like . . .

May: They didn't know Tommy? [That is, they based their evaluation of his ability on neighborhood stereotypes.] [We laugh.]

Tommy: Naw.

May: What about, you think race has anything to do with whether somebody is a good athlete or not?

Tommy: Not necessarily. It's just, like, some of it you get from, like, just genes or whatever. Just being, like, a pure athlete, I think that's just genes pretty much.

May: You think particular races have a better or more of a chance of being pure athletes than other races?

Tommy: Yeah.

May: Like, so if you compared Asians and whites [we both laugh], you might say that Asians would be better players or better pure athletes than whites?

Tommy: I'd probably say it the other way around.

May: Yeah. What about blacks and whites?

Tommy: I would say blacks probably.

Although Tommy suggests that members of particular racial groups (for instance, whites) are better athletes than those of other racial groups (for instance, Asians), he is also aware that genes across racial groups are an important determinant as to whether an individual will be a pure athlete. It is conceivable, from Tommy's perspective, that individuals from various racial groups who are good athletes will have been born of parents who also were genetically more athletic than the average members of that racial group. Thus, those blacks who are pure athletes are born of parents who are also athletes, whereas those blacks who do not demonstrate athletic talent were not passed the genetic makeup to be pure athletes.

Interestingly, Tommy demonstrates a keen understanding of the racial hierarchy with regard to those athletes most frequently categorized as superior. His ranking of blacks over whites and whites over Asians reflects the social hierarchy of athleticism as it is understood generally. Perhaps his understanding of the politics of race in sports is grounded in the fact that his father was an excellent athlete throughout high school, college, and the professional ranks. It is likely that once Tommy had been identified as the son of Photon Colt, coaches,

parents, and peers began dubbing him a natural athlete because his father had been a successful athlete. Furthermore, I speculate that since Tommy's youth, his father had exposed him, whether directly or indirectly, to stereotypical assertions about race, genes, and athletic ability. Thus, Tommy internalized these notions as explanations for why he at least felt that he was a better athlete than both his black and white peers. In a sense, his ability was predicated on the fact that he was born of a father who had demonstrated athleticism beyond what one might expect to be average or normal.

Whereas the players' perceptions of race and athletic ability are shaped by their participation in a contemporary context of sport, the perceptions of the adults involved with the Northeast Knights are grounded in experiences of more racially tumultuous times.

### Confronting Racism

Big Harry, the father of Harry, one of our star players on the Northeast Knights, recalls playing football in high school against an all-white team in the 1970s. From my notes:

*Big Harry rode with us on the bus to the game. He is pretty talkative, so I was surprised that Coach Benson let him go with us. At any rate, on the way to the game, Big Harry began recounting his experience of playing football in one of the small white towns in the '70s. He said, "Man, let me tell you. I was playing football, and it used to be really bad. White folks would call you all kinds of stuff. Shit, the cheerleaders for the other school were calling you all types of N words. The fans were calling you all kinds of N words. They were something else. They would really be hostile toward you."*

Big Harry's recollection is not unusual when one considers the social context of school desegregation in the South. With the busing of black students to predominantly white schools during the early 1970s, racial tensions were heightened to a fever pitch. Given the history of racial violence against blacks and the fact that there are still residual effects in some areas of Georgia today, one can easily imagine the level of intimidation that Big Harry might have endured during his participation in football games in rural parts of Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, Coach Odell Henry, who grew up in the Northeast

area during the '80s and '90s, had similar recollections. During the 1994–95 basketball season, Coach Henry played high school basketball for Ford Heights in Northeast. During those years his team traveled to games in various rural areas of Northern Georgia. Coach Henry recalls a trip they took to North Farmington High School. Because this area is rural, it had been referred to by players and coaches as populated by “hillbillies”—a classist term with racial implications when used by blacks. Again from my notes:

*Coach Henry had been listening to Big Harry's story about playing football in South Georgia. He then began to tell a story about playing in North Farmington. Coach Henry said, "We went up here to North Farmington in '94, '95. Shit, time we came in the door them white folks started calling us nigger. They would call you nigger when we went up to play. The fans and everyone else called you nigger. We went ahead and played the game, then we got the fuck up outta there. We didn't stop nowhere."*

*Coach Frye agreed, "I went to scout a game up there recently, and they were acting that way. I was sitting on their side of the gym. But when they started hollering this I said to myself, 'Let me get back over to where I belong.' I got up and changed sides. I sat on the visitor's side."*

Although the commentary of the men might be perceived as an attempt to outboast one another in talk, the reality is that each recollection shared by the adults becomes part of an intertwined cluster of stories that fuse together in a collective memory of race and sport in Northeast. These stories are rarely challenged; there is a taken-for-granted understanding that this “shit happens.” This taken-for-granted reality is reproduced in similar form through the generations.<sup>10</sup>

Even though Coach Frye and Coach Henry competed in sports a generation after Big Harry, they were still exposed to blatant racial comments from white spectators. Given the historical ties that certain racial epithets have to violence against blacks, these epithets are of real concern and are not taken lightly.

The fact that we, as coaches, had personal experience playing games in racially hostile places like North Farmington meant that we were in a position to help our players negotiate their experiences in a manner that might also help them to optimize their performance. Although I had never played at North Farmington, I had experienced

similar environments while playing college basketball. It was one school in particular, Olivet Nazarene College in Kankakee, Illinois (seventy miles from Chicago), that seemed to have the most notorious reputation among our players and coaches for its racial hostility. When I had first heard about Olivet in 1985, our head coach was telling us in a pregame meeting, “It’s a tough place to play. They don’t really care about blacks.” After the meeting I asked one of the black upperclassmen what Olivet was really like. He replied, “Man, they are racists at that place. Don’t look for no calls. The fans yell all kinds of shit at you.”

When we arrived at Olivet that evening, the gymnasium was packed with white fans that were energetic and vocal. As I recall, with the exception of one player, the Olivet team was all white. Although I do not recall hearing “niggers” or other racial epithets specifically, I interpreted the hostility with which the fans greeted us to be about much more than basketball. Maybe it was my white coach’s saying “they really don’t care about blacks” that had me predisposed to interpret the fans’ behavior as racially motivated. Maybe it was my teammate’s observation that “they are racists” that had me ready to look for racial hostility. Still, it felt like much more was going on than pure fan support. Perhaps, given what I had learned about Kankakee in general—my mother, for example, had referred to it as “Mississippi, Illinois,” to connote the racist attitudes—and what I have experienced coaching since that time, it is difficult for me not to see the Olivet fans’ hostility toward our team as racially motivated. The fans seemed to grasp onto the racial subtext of the game as a means for motivating their home team. I would argue that such a racial subtext is the basis on which many interpretive responses to interracial interactions are founded—in sports and in life generally.

The adults involved with the Northeast basketball program explicitly considered issues of race within the context of sports. These considerations flowed from past and present experiences. For instance, a key period of transformation in race relations in Northeast was the combining of Tuxton and Harriston high schools in 1971 to create Northeast High School. At that time residents and high school students were forced to confront direct competition between blacks and whites on the athletic playing field, among other places. This competition was exacerbated by the social constraints that had been placed on white and black interaction during Jim Crow segregation. Thus, with the emergence of integration, each athletic event involving

whites and blacks had the potential to bring forth hostilities that reasserted racial boundaries.

Big Harry's and the other coaches' recollections provide a context for understanding some of the adults' historical perceptions of whites in and around Northeast. Each successive generation seems to have dealt with mutations of the racial tension from the generation prior. Coach Henry's feelings of anxiety at being called a nigger in the 1990s confirmed his belief in racism. The young men that currently compete for the Northeast Knights must also confront racism within the context of the game. For instance, Cerico shared comments that identify the ongoing nature of racial antagonism that exists for the young men of the Northeast Knights. Cerico recounted an incident that occurred in 2001 during our game against North Farmington. His serendipitous disclosure was in response to my question about his own on-the-court behavior and whether he retaliates when he feels an opposing player has done something wrong to him.

*May:* I mean, is there a difference between Cerico on the court and when he is Cerico just hanging out or whatever?

*Cerico:* Oh, yeah. I think I act different. 'Cause on the court, man, it's just nothing but business. Man, I wanna win, that's all. Whatever it take, grabbing his jersey, pulling his shoes off, whatever.

*May:* Anybody ever do something like that to you when you were playing?

*Cerico:* Yeah. [I laugh.] I remember we played North Farmington. This white dude tripped me up, then he called me a nigger, man, May. God.

*May:* What? [incredulously] When you was playing?

*Cerico:* Yeah, we were playing. We was up in the tournament, too.

*May:* [Questioning his seriousness] Wait.

*Cerico:* Yeah, I swear. It was the tall dude. His name was Wyatt Jenkins . . .

*May:* The one that was scoring all their points?

*Cerico:* Yeah, the one that was scoring all the points. He tripped me up . . .

*May:* He tripped you up and then called you a nigger?

*Cerico:* Yeah. I had—I had to get him back. Do whatever it takes. I got an elbow in.

*May:* I hadn't heard about that.

Cerico nonchalantly stated, "He tripped me up and called me a nigger." Such a casual disclosure to me suggests that racially charged incidents like this occur frequently but are rarely explicitly discussed by the Knights. It was only after I prodded Cerico to tell me about his own on-the-court attitude that this negative interracial experience came to light.

The frequency of such events is suggested by the fact that a few weeks earlier the Northeast Knights freshman team had gone to another school, Nimrod County, to play and had also received verbal harassment. Because of this racial antagonism, we had to have a police escort to Nimrod County. From my notes:

*We were headed to Nimrod County to play. The day before, Coach Henry had taken the freshmen up to Nimrod, and they beat the dickens out of Nimrod. Coach Henry told us that while he was there the referees had to stop the game and talk to the fans because the fans were shouting "nigger" at the Northeast Knight freshman players. These events from the day before prompted our principal to have a sheriff escort us all to the game. The girls' team had the escort there since they played before us. We had the escort coming back since we played last.*

This incident suggests that racial antagonisms continue to be a part of the Northeast Knights' experiences, rather than some distant experiences that coaches recall from many years gone by. Given the fact that the Northeast Knights continue to play in predominantly white areas, the explicit statements like those of the fans from Nimrod County remind the players of the significance of race. However, even without such outward manifestations of racial antagonisms, the young men's understanding of the previous experiences of their coaches might still provide the subtext for negatively interpreting interracial encounters.

### Beyond Taboo

Given the fact that so many of the players rarely suggested racial-group membership as a positive or negative indicator of athletic success, what have we garnered about the players' understanding about the relationship between race, social environment, and athletic ability?

John Entine, author of *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk about It*, observes that to most people who follow sports, it is clear that blacks are superior athletes and that this superiority is related to race and genes.<sup>11</sup> If we accept Entine's observation, then the Northeast Knights' evaluation of white athletes in comparison to black athletes is an anomaly. This raises the question of whether there is anything about the young men's experience at Northeast that inhibits them from identifying similar stereotypes about black males' athletic ability as compared with white males within their own competitive environment. Indeed, this is an interesting question, especially given the fact that these young men are cognizant of the significance of race in other areas of their lives.<sup>12</sup> I suggest the following three possible explanations for the players' perceptions about race and athletic ability: (1) the players interact with white athletes who share skills and abilities comparable to their own; (2) the players have been insulated from structural factors that raise racial distinctions to greater salience; and (3) the players have embraced a sense of meritocracy within their own athletic setting.

Most high school teams are composed of the best athletes within each school. Since the Knights do not compete at the elite level of high school basketball, they are exposed to white athletes who share comparable skills and abilities as their own. Specifically, Northeast High School players compete within a general pool of athletic talent where the subtle distinctions that make an athlete great are not present or yet identified. When the Knights compete against teams from North Farmington, Nimrod County, and Wilmington County, they are, for the most part, competing against white athletes who are good but not great. Given the players' own limited abilities and that of their white counterparts, the players may conclude that white males are as athletic as black males. The players are therefore evaluating athletic ability associated with race from the standpoint of their own participation and not from the grand scale used in general to evaluate elite athletes. Perhaps if the players were asked directly which athlete they thought was more athletic, a particular professional black athlete or a particular professional white athlete, they would select the black athlete. They might infer that professional black athletes are superior merely because they appear in the NBA in greater numbers.

A second explanation for the boys' perceptions of race and athletic ability is that although the Northeast Knights attend a racially

mixed school, their limited interaction with whites within the school context does not permit them to assess the magnitude to which race plays out in broader society. Beyond their awareness that some whites might call them "nigger" and that there are limits on the level of association that they may have with whites, the players, like other blacks at Northeast, have not been exposed to the fullness of racial tension that experience grants. As teenagers, the players are in an idealistic stage of life—a stage in which race should not matter. This position helps to ground the young men's thoughts as to the importance of race for athletic ability. It is only after experiences that move beyond high school that the players might begin to get a sense of the complicated and pervasive nature of race within American culture. Thus, as the players make the transition into adulthood, one might expect that the influence of conventional wisdom might transform the young men's beliefs about race to include the notion of the superior black male athlete. That is, the more they become acclimated to the normative understandings of race, the more their views will become consistent with conventional wisdom about race and athletics.

The final explanation for the boys' perceptions is that the players have a belief, stemming from their idealism, in meritocracy. The players embrace the notion of equal opportunity. Their perceptions of the unlimited potential to become whatever one wishes are deeply entrenched in their minds; so too is the individualization of failure—that is, "you failed because you couldn't make it." The players' posture toward opportunity is embedded within the context of their own participation in basketball. Members of the Knights team come to understand that the coaches are constantly evaluating individual players and that those individuals who work hard and demonstrate ability are given the opportunity to play. This belief keeps the players thinking, "I know I'm going to have my chance one day," even among those who consistently have been marginal participants. The players' reliance on meritocracy is predictable, given Coach Benson's articulated belief that every player should be given an opportunity to perform. As the players see structural opportunities in practice, they come to perceive that those who are the best will indeed have an opportunity to demonstrate that ability.

## Conclusion

The players and coaches of the Northeast Knights consider issues of race within the context of their sports experiences. Their perspectives on the significance of race in everyday life are grounded in their understanding of the historically racist social climate of places like Northeast. The coaches and players deconstruct their negative encounters with whites by using racial frames to explain the underlying source of conflict. Throughout my time with Coach Benson he maintained that underneath the surface of matters that involved blacks and whites, racial tension was a key subtext.

Although Coach Benson and the other coaches viewed race as the source of much conflict around sports, they rarely encouraged the young men of Northeast to focus on race as an impediment to their aspirations and achievement. Benson, in particular, would often emphasize that issues of race mattered little with respect to whether one was able to achieve. For Benson, individuals who become preoccupied with the motives of those acting to prevent success were wasting valuable time and energy—both important resources better used for actual competition. This perspective on how to deal with negative racial encounters is consistent with a key rationalization used by many blacks who choose to ignore racism and discrimination in order to focus their efforts on personal achievement. By focusing on the possibilities for success rather than the impediments of race, individuals avoid being derailed from their pursuits.

One underlying theme of the stories shared by coaches and players is that black men must compete, not only against the respective white teams or individuals within the playing context but also against negative historical conceptions of blacks more generally. From this standpoint, whites are perceived to enjoy a clear advantage over blacks because of the inequitable power dynamics rooted in whites' past oppressions of blacks.

The use of race as a framework for understanding negative encounters with whites raises an interesting question: to what extent are the players and coaches unnecessarily appropriating a racial framework to explain occurrences as "racial" that could just as easily be explained as everyday matters that affect individuals irrespective of race? For example, why is it that the Northeast Knights view their negative encounters with hostile fans from places like North Farming-

ton—characterized as a white hillbilly town—as racists? What is the difference between hostile fans calling an opponent "nigger" as a means of disrupting concentration and hostile fans using other derogatory terms to unnerve their opponents?

The simple answer is that there is little difference with respect to fans' goals of affecting the visiting team's play. When one views the use of pejorative terms that have far-reaching historical implications, however, these terms have a far more profound impact on the psyche of the young black men and coaches who compete for teams like the Northeast Knights. It is clear to those involved that words like "nigger" were used as an expression of hate toward blacks. Furthermore, such words were historically supported by actual violent acts toward blacks. Thus, pejorative terms laden with historical meanings of hate transform the social context from one of an athletic competition to a symbolic battle over racial pride.

This transformation of a sporting event is consistent with the ways in which both whites and blacks transform generic conflict (i.e., conflict that would generally be considered negative by most anyone, irrespective of race) into a racialized conflict in which the stakes of respectability and honor are much higher. Within this context, not only are the players competing for the Northeast Knights, but once these racial lines are drawn, the players are also competing for the pride of blacks more broadly. Such a symbolic transformation of a sporting event is not surprising given that the Knights reside in an American social system built on conflict between racial and ethnic groups who are in competition for market goods and resources and who have limited means to attain those goods and resources. The impact of this social system is not always apparent to those in conflict.

Perhaps for the black athlete there is no context in which race has been of more salient importance than the discussions of blacks' purported superior athletic ability as compared to whites' ability. These discussions about blacks as superior athletes are undergirded by racist rhetoric that asserts that blacks are more impulsive and instinctual, and therefore less capable of rational thinking. Furthermore, these same notions inform both blacks' own boastful expressions of athletic success and whites' concessions to blacks for their purported athletic ability. It is this taken-for-granted notion that is the basis of conventional wisdom about the relationship between race and athletic ability. Yet the young men who compete for the Northeast Knights generally

hold perceptions of athletic ability that run contrary to conventional wisdom that accords superior athletic ability to blacks.

The fact that the young men view sport as a level playing field becomes an impetus for their focus on basketball as a means of mobility. Within their own racially segregated communities the young men see that there are limits to the kinds of occupations that they can pursue as a means of social mobility. They see that people in their communities have gone to school and gotten an education only for the satisfaction of living in places from which the young men are trying to escape. The young men assess their situation in light of the idealized lifestyles of professional athletes and determine that playing basketball within their neighborhood environments can give them the best opportunity to move beyond where they live.

The Northeast players' communities are much like other densely populated, low-income, racially segregated urban areas throughout the United States. These disproportionately black areas are places where young men have ready mentors—those athletes who may have been successful high school athletes but have failed to move beyond—to direct them into sports. It is within their neighborhood contexts that the players believe they can develop the physical and mental toughness necessary for becoming a professional athlete. Furthermore, it is through their participation in high school athletics that the young men receive community support for their hard work. The young men derive a sense of autonomy from these experiences and charge forward in pursuit of social mobility through athletic participation.