

Black Athletes Victims Of Sensationalism

by Mark A. Adams and Marjorie Roach
Special to The Black Ink

The image and treatment of Black athletes in colleges across the nation are a topic of great concern.

With the increased media coverage of negative events in the lives of such athletes as Olden Polynice and Chris Washburn, those most affected by the latest fad of sensationalism of what a Black kid can do wrong in college are the other athletes that find themselves constantly watched for the time they make a mistake, cheat on a test or get caught playing a prank on a teammate, friend or fellow student.

"They're all (the media) becoming more and more like the National Enquirer, trying to dig up some dirt on some poor kid and get a story before someone else does," said NCCU high jumper Obie Martin.

"Athletes are human beings just like everyone else. They eat, sleep and cry. No one has the right to make a kid's life miserable, publicly, just because he's cheated on a test. More than half the people writing the things that can make or break a kid like Polynice's chances of being a pro athlete probably cheated on something more than one time in their lives," Martin continued.

Mike Wright agreed with Martin, saying, "All humans are entitled to mistakes. I think the Washburn thing was blown out of proportion. I'm glad he's getting another chance. The worse thing about these incidents is that it always happens to a Black athlete. There are white kids cheating on tests and playing pranks on each other every day. But there is no effort (on the part of the media) to humiliate them nationally."

One problem that many educators feel adds fuel to the fire is the pressures heaped on athletes that do not have the potential to handle a college workload. These administrators contend that athletes should not be given special considerations or that admission policies should not be waived to admit an athlete, simply because he can an asset to an athletic program.

UNC-Chapel Hill basketball player Kenny Smith, feels that "half the athletes may not be at the university's (academic) level, but it's giving kids a chance they couldn't afford if they hadn't gotten into basketball. A lot of universities make exceptions for athletes. There is a five percent acceptance for students with special talents."

Martin considers the waiver procedure acceptable in certain instances. "There should be a waiver if the person has the potential to be a college athlete with a good chance of graduating on his own."

The coaches' role in an athlete's smooth passage through college is very important according to Smith, "at any university coaches have to check on the academics for any athlete."

Wright agrees that the coach is a valuable person in the athlete's development both on and off the court, but "a coach can only do so much. The individual has to make his own decisions. And what they've (Polynice and Washburn) done isn't the coaches' faults. It's the values on the part of the athletes. They have to know what they can and cannot do."

Larry James, a UNC defensive back, is aware that a coach can be a negative influence on an athlete as well as positive. "I see a lot of recruiting violations. I once saw a coach bring \$6,000 in cash to a player."

These violations are not just restricted to one sport and the name of the game is "to get really talented players you have got pay. Football does it a lot more than basketball, though."

Although James received such offers when he was in high school, he turned them down. "I was offered a car and \$1,000 a month from one school, but I didn't take the offer. The school would have gotten on probation and I never would have played in ball games."

Martin admires James for his resistance, but realizes "other athletes are greatly influenced by those offers they can't refuse. They come from poor backgrounds and they get caught up in the glamour."

Part of the glamour is the impression that either they can do no wrong or the wrong that they do will be overlooked. Where these ideas come from or that they exist shouldn't take precedence over an athlete's future.

"Being a superior athlete with pro potential, his (Polynice) future shouldn't be taken away from him because he succumbed to the pressures of college. He cheated, but he admitted it and that shows that he's a decent kid. It is his athletic ability that got him in school and kept him there," stated Martin.

With Washburn, "it is basketball that is his way of staying out of trouble," contends Wright.

Commenting on the academic records of Washburn being put on public display by the nation's media is an act that cannot be condoned, according to Smith, "He was definitely exploited. He took an IQ test in the sixth grade. One does not take such a test seriously, thinking it will affect his life. I'm sure there are other athletes with the same score. He was victimized in some ways, but then again he did bring it on himself by stealing the stereo."

Black Studies Conceived From Student Protest

by Herman L. Bennett
Columnist

The failure of the 1960s to usher in fundamental social and economic changes in the lives of most Blacks resulted in an increased militant mood among the younger generation of Blacks especially college students. Inspired by the teachings of Malcom X, Dr. Martin Luther King and the liberation struggles of the African peoples, Black youth began to demand radical reforms in American society. More importantly however, Black students, particularly those on predominantly white college campuses, began to call for educational (curriculum) reforms.

The outcome of the Black student protests in many instances led to the creation of programs in Black Studies. These programs, in the view of Black students, were necessary in order for Blacks to cope with paternalism, racism and a general lack of emphasis on studying issues concerning Blacks. Black Studies, in one sense, grew out of the psychological and emotional needs of Black students in search of their "distinctive" cultural identity.

As one scholar suggested, Black Studies was an attempt to "dehonorify" the white university.

Black Studies, however, was more than the creation of a program focusing on the study of Blacks. For many of the more militant Black Studies advocates, the purpose of the program was "the advancement of the Black revolution in every facet of American life." The Black Studies curriculum was thus aimed at providing Black students with the necessary knowledge to mobilize the Black community into action.

In addition, Black Studies programs were also instructing Black students in political tactics and strategies, while providing them with theoretical and practical experience so that they could help alleviate the sordid conditions of the urban ghettos and Black belt South. In other words, Black Studies was oriented towards activism, rather than being narrowly focused on academia. In fact, for many of the Black students, the emphasis on traditional subjects was secondary if at all necessary.

Yet, the period of rebellion and reform has passed. No longer are Black students wearing Afro-hairdos, dashikis or addressing one another as "brothers" and "sisters." Indeed, the 1984 presidential campaign witnessed a Black male running for Democratic Party nomination. Aware of these changing realities, one must ask whether the Black experience on the 80s suggests a need for a new focus for Afro-American Studies.

Although I do not question the emotional and psychological needs of Black students on predominantly white campuses or the extent to which racism still

prevails in American society, I would argue that the present realities require Black Studies Programs to adopt a more sophisticated focus, with a particular relevance for the coming decades. In the present period, militancy alone cannot be expected to produce solutions to the problems confronting Blacks in America.

In fact, if Afro-American/Black Studies is to be applicable to contemporary situations, it must break out of the ideological straightjacket that has characterized it during the late 60s and early 70s. Moreover, the current realities -- the growing level of Black unemployment, the alarming rate of Black single parent-households, and the expanding number of Blacks who fall below the poverty level -- necessitate that Black Studies programs encourage Black students to acquire what has been termed by some individuals as a "traditional" education.

In other words, it is necessary for Black college students to take courses in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. While there are individuals who view this emphasis as being too "traditional," I would respond that there is little value for Black students in taking a course on "Black mathematics," for example. These students need to be able to think in a critical fashion following their graduation. Incidentally, one scholar suggested that in a course on "Black mathematics," the instructor might ask, "If you loot one store and burn two, how many do you have left?"

Today, more than ever, with 34 percent of the Black population under the poverty level, 18 percent of the Black adult population unemployed, and 47 percent of Black households headed by females, it is even more crucial for Blacks to acquire a liberal arts or vocational education.

Confronted with these grim realities and the failure of early Black Studies programs to come to terms with them makes it necessary for contemporary Black Studies to emphasize a curriculum in "traditional" subjects.

The emphasis on traditional academic subjects and their content can't be overstated. Subjects would range from Afro-American History to Afro-American Folklore, thus making the Black Studies educational experience interdisciplinary in its approach. In addition, the students must be expected to meet high academic standards. Only if Black Studies programs can become "respected and rigorous as any other discipline," will they be effective in combating intellectual racism, at the same time be able to produce individuals who are capable of critical thinking.

Therefore, acceptance of lower standards for Blacks must be viewed as paternalistic. (continued on page 8)