

Becoming an Agent of Change to Combat Institutional and Cultural Racism

Latisha Forster-Scott

Is sport one of the places in American culture wherein a person's race does not matter? Some may believe that sport is a place in American culture that is free of the racial prejudices and practices that plague so many of our institutions. However, when you take a closer look at the landscape of sport, it simply is not true. Race does matter. Racism in sport does exist. Multicultural and valuing diversity practices are still an ideal instead of the norm (Duda & Allison, 1990; Martens, Mobley, & Zizzi, 2000).

Racism is a self-perpetuating imbalance of power, it can be overt or covert, intentional or not (Feagin, 2006). Part of the problem is that many deny, are unaware of, or choose to ignore the impact of institutional and cultural racism (Ponterotto & Pederson, 1993). Racism goes beyond individual acts; it is steeped within our institutions and culture and it will take clear recognition of the nature in which common practices and beliefs continue to impact our everyday lives. One may not consciously practice or uphold racist beliefs; however, we all function within a system in which racist ideologies are a foundation of many of our institutions. The institution of sport is no exception (Brooks & Althouse, 2000).

All ethnic minorities are still highly under-represented in most American sport at the athlete, coaching, administrative, and ownership levels (Lapchick, 2008). There are clear relationships between socioeconomic status and the types of sport people participate in; and even when economic differences are accounted for, there are still racial differences in how people take part and experience sport (Cunningham, 2007).

Institutional racism in sport is not as overt as it once was; the propensity for racism is more covert. For example, our culture celebrates the Black male athlete who is able to conquer

the athletic field, but many still hold stereotypical beliefs about Black male's ability to succeed in other avenues and would otherwise fear a Black male outside of a sport setting (Barkley, 2005). Other forms of racism in sport include recruitment strategies to avoid particular communities and schools with high percentages of racial minorities, circumventing sports counseling or coaching with particular racial groups, creating requirements which make it more difficult for ethnic minorities to participate in sport, not providing access and opportunity for ethnic minorities at coaching, administrative, and ownership levels (Cunningham, 2007; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004).

Addressing issues of racism in sport often deal with surface level approaches that often do very little to change structures of organizations and the way people operate. There is a tendency to only deal with surface level issues of race and racism and not deeper aspects of people's beliefs and value systems. If we are to reduce the impact of racism and race effects, we need to go beyond surface level solutions. There has to be a simultaneous renewal of individual and collective commitment to address these issues. It is not work that can be easily accomplished in a seminar, workshop, or one course that deals with issues of race and diversity. It requires self reflection, institutional change, and cultural recognition that this is everyone's issue, not just those negatively affected. The work that is needed cannot be left to be done only by those who are passionate about these issues; we all have to take part. We can begin by recognizing that we all have prejudices, we all have issues to work through when it comes to our limited understanding of others', and a commitment to renew our institutions and practices to become more equitable and just.

Here are some brief recommendations in becoming an agent of change:

1. *Increase awareness.* This will require examining your own thoughts, attitudes, and experiences related to issues of race through deep and honest introspection. It also requires becoming more educated about other racial and ethnic groups different from your own, or groups you are normally accustomed to being around. Cultural competence is an important component to dealing with issues of race and racism. Achieving cultural competence does not come in the form of taking one course or attending a workshop to fulfill a requirement. It requires deep reflection and inquiry over time and the cognitive flexibility to adjust and readjust ways of thinking and doing (Caldwell, Jackson, Tucker, & Bowman, 1999).

2. *Expand methodical approaches.* Are any of your practices offensive, discriminatory, or exclusionary? You may be unaware that certain things you do or say in your professional environment negatively affect particular groups of people. For example, you speak in a way that is not your normal use of language in attempt to show understanding or commonality; however, those same people who you are trying to relate to become offended because they think you are being fake, demeaning, or mocking their culture. You have not spent enough time evaluating your stereotypical beliefs or assumptions, nor do you understand the nuances of intergroup relations relative to race and ethnicity. Make sure the language and the tone that you use do not offend people otherwise your intent will be misunderstood. It is also suggested that use of music or literature in your methods are inclusive, and that you develop methods to allow for cultural differences without losing effectiveness.

3. *Be pro-active.* Actively support initiatives to reduce the effects of racism and increase levels of diversity at your institution. Speak openly about your concerns and do not assume that someone else will do the necessary work. This may mean developing a clear cut mission to increase the number of racial minorities who participate in sport at all levels, or creating

programs to support initiatives that already exist. Physically attend and contribute to these programs by making it a priority.

It is important to note the progress that has been made in many aspects of our society; however, our work towards equitable treatment and practices that are fair for all people, is not done. Becoming an agent of change requires conscious and deliberate effort. It requires all of us.

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