ABSTRACT: Modern Black athletes have a dilemma: to be or not to be . . . like Mike? Michael Jordan’s athletic and financial success are exceptional. However, his apathy toward sociopolitical issues is troubling for individuals who judge today’s Black athletes on standards set by athletes during the Civil Rights movement. This essay explores this dilemma by (1) critiquing Jordan’s historical significance within the Black community, (2) comparing four prominent Black athletes following in Jordan’s footsteps as iconic figures, and (3) challenging the opinion that Black athletes have to express concern over issues that resonate with the majority of Blacks to maintain acceptance within the Black community. Two athletes in this study have chosen the benefits of mainstream acceptance over an active role in social justice. However, others prove that today’s Black athletes no longer have to choose one over the other.

I love Michael Jordan! As a kid I often found myself in the neighborhood playground pretending to be my idol, taking a game winning shot in the final seconds of the NBA finals. Three, two, one, swishhhhhh! As a college student, a fresh pair of Nike Air Jordan sneakers was a regular part of my wardrobe. What’s not to love about Michael Jordan? He is arguably the greatest basketball player in history and the most influential professional athlete of the twentieth century. Jordan’s dazzling moves on the court caused fits of exuberance among spectators that would make one think they were getting the Holy Ghost at a church revival. Michael Jordan was a six-time world champion, five-time Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the league, fourteen-time All-Star, ten-time scoring champion, two-time dunk contest champion, and 2009 inductee into the Basketball Hall of Fame. He was just as successful off the court, transcending race, breaking barriers for his successors, and gaining mainstream acceptance unlike any other Black athlete in
history. As the majority owner of the Charlotte Bobcats, he is the only African American in this position. Forbes magazine added Jordan to their list of billionaires in 2015.

For many Americans, Jordan’s success is enough for him to be viewed as a role model. But for others, his failure to use his lofty platform to be a trailblazer for social change is a mark on his legacy. Football icon Jim Brown has been critical of Jordan for failing to carry the torch of the activist-athletes of the 1960s. Professor Harry Edwards, author of The Revolt of the Black Athlete (1968) and an icon of social activism, once described Jordan as a racial mascot (Herse, 1995). Professor John Hobberman (1997), says that the more White America feared Black males, the more they built up a false love affair with Jordan, their idealized non-threatening Black man. Hobberman goes on to argue that White supremacists use Jordan’s athletic success to seduce Black youth into abandoning school and social responsibility in exchange for the sexy trappings of professional sports.

William Rhoden, a Black sports columnist for the New York Times, views Jordan as the antithesis of Jim Crow–era Black athletes like Brown. “Had he said ‘jump,’ had he said ‘protest,’ most athletes would have jumped; most would have protested. Instead, Jordan said, ‘Be like Mike.’” Dave Zirin (2005), a White sportswriter who has published several notable works on race and politics in sports, has also been critical of Jordan’s stance on civil rights. However, David Falk, a Jewish American sports agent who represented Jordan during his entire playing career, disagrees with those who attack his client’s apolitical demeanor. Falk points to Jordan’s upbringing as a root cause for his attitudes on race and activism. “His parents raised him to be color-blind,” says Falk (as cited in Rhoden, 2007, p. 24).

Since his playing days, various biographies have been written about Michael Jordan. Sam Smith’s controversial 1993 bestseller, The Jordan Rules, paints a negative picture of the hoops legend as a selfish teammate and ruthless competitor. Roland Lazenby’s (2015) Michael Jordan: The Life provides the most detailed and balanced look at Jordan’s life to date, whereas Walter LaFaebur’s (2002) Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism is the best book on Jordan’s financial impact on American business at home and abroad. Jordan is also a popular subject in various books, news articles, and book chapters dealing with sports, race, and politics. William Rhoden’s (2007) Forty Million Dollar Slaves is especially critical of Jordan’s lack of social consciousness and cultural awareness and Todd Boyd (2008) refers to Jordan as the godfather of today’s “generation me” Black athletes, who are overly concerned with money and endorsement deals, in Young, Black, Rich, and Famous. Michael Jordan has also coauthored three autobiographies.

This article adds to the literature on Michael Jordan, in particular, and Black athletes, in general, by doing the following: (1) critiquing Jordan’s historical
significance within the Black community, (2) comparing four prominent Black athletes following in Jordan’s footsteps as iconic figures, and (3) challenging the opinion that Black athletes have to express concern over issues that resonate with the majority of Blacks to maintain acceptance within the Black community. Two athletes examined have chosen the benefits of mainstream acceptance over an active role in social justice. However, the others prove that today’s Black athletes no longer have to choose one over the other. As an advocate for civil rights, I agree that Jordan and his successors can do more. However, it is unfair and unrealistic in the twenty-first century to judge someone’s Blackness by their adherence to the expectations of others and standards set by trailblazing Black athletes over 40 years ago.

THE BIRTH OF “AIR” JORDAN PART I

Michael Jordan was born on February 17, 1963. His father James served in the Air Force before taking a job with General Electric as a forklift operator in Wallace, North Carolina. James eventually became a supervisor. Jordan’s mother, Deloris, met James before he left for the military and attended Tuskegee Institute. After college, she returned to North Carolina and married James. The Jordans moved to Brooklyn in 1962, but later moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, due to increasing drug and gang problems. Back in North Carolina, Deloris moved up the corporate ladder at United Carolina Bank.

James and Deloris provided a comfortable middle-class upbringing for Jordan and his four siblings. Despite North Carolina’s history as a former member of the Confederacy and being a stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan, Jordan’s parents stressed tolerance and chose not to dwell on the racial tension engulfing the country. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the young Michael was not aware of the racial climate and history of his home state from its role in the Confederacy during the Civil War to recent nonviolent sit-ins staged by students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and the militant actions of Robert F. Williams. Williams, the president of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP chapter, attempted to combat racial violence by organizing a Black Armed Guard equipped with firearms and his 1962 book, Negroes with Guns, influenced the militant philosophy of the Black Panthers.

North Carolina was not only a hotbed for civil rights, but also college basketball. Duke University, Wake Forest University, North Carolina State University at Raleigh, and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (UNC) were members of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). The ACC schools, like their other southern counterparts, struggled to preserve the color line. After the University
of Maryland, College Park, integrated their basketball team in 1966, the North Carolina schools followed suit. In 1968, Charles Scott became the first Black varsity player at UNC. Scott was recruited by UNC’s trailblazing head coach Dean Smith, a White man from Kansas who dedicated his life to basketball and social justice. In 1964, Smith worked with a local pastor and a Black divinity student to integrate a local restaurant. A year later, he assisted a Black UNC graduate student in purchasing a home in an all-White neighborhood. Years later, when Jesse Helms, North Carolina’s racist Republican senator, sought his support, he rejected Helms’s solicitations, and in 1981, Smith recruited Michael Jordan to join the Tar Heels.

Michael Jordan’s middle-class lifestyle and his parents’ decision not to make race a big issue in their household may have contributed to his sociopolitical apathy in his adult years. In a 2014 biography, *Michael Jordan: The Life*, by Roland Lazenby, Jordan admits to being racist toward all Whites after being called a nigger by his classmates. After his mother told him that he could not go through life hating others because of their race his spirit of rebelliousness quickly subsided. I wonder how much his mother’s experience at Tuskegee Institute impacted the way she taught her children to view race and civil rights. Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, was one of the most powerful Black men of the era. Washington had the support of powerful White politicians, wealthy businessmen and philanthropists, and members of the Black middle class. W. E. B. Du Bois (1994), a noted scholar and cofounder of the NAACP, called Washington an accommodationist in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* because he did not believe that he was using his powerful status to fight for civil rights and integration (pp. 25–36).

Jordan grew up at a time when Black athletes were still fighting for acceptance. He was three years old when Texas Western College won the NCAA men’s basketball championship with five Black starters. At the professional level, Black athletes did not receive the huge contracts and endorsement deals that the White players did, and some Black athletes engaged in the Civil Rights movement. For example, the Boston Celtics center Bill Russell, the NBA’s first Black head coach, refused to play in a game after he and his Black teammates were denied lodging in the hotel that accommodated fellow teammates. He challenged the NBA to hire its first Black referee and visited Mississippi after NAACP leader Medgar Evers was assassinated to experience the state’s racial climate firsthand.

Russell met with Jim Brown, Muhammad Ali, Bobby Mitchell, Lew Alcindor, and other notable figures in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1967 to publicly support Ali’s stance against the Vietnam War. Ali’s conscientious objection cost him three years at the height of his boxing career (Simzak, 2012). These men lived at a time when
speaking out may not have been the norm for Black athletes, but it was certainly more popular than it would be in later decades. In 1967, basketball legend Lew Alcindor, now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, joined the boycott of the 1968 Olympics led by San Jose State College professor Harry Edwards. Alcindor also supported John Carlos and Tommie Smith, the two Black sprinters who were asked to leave the 1968 games for making a symbolic gesture for Black power and equality during their medal presentation. The two men were excoriated in the American media and received death threats upon their return home (Zirin, 2005, p. 79).

Major League Baseball (MLB) star Curt Flood experienced a similar fate for his activism. Flood refused to report to work after the St. Louis Cardinals traded him to the Philadelphia Phillies, arguing that the MLB’s reserve clause made the athletes the property (slaves) of their teams. His case reached the Supreme Court and led to free agency in all professional sports, but he became an outcast in the MLB for his activism. The 1968 Olympic games and Flood’s experience were warning signs of the danger Black athletes faced if they spoke out on social issues. But not all Black athletes were frightened off by such negative consequences. Arthur Ashe was the first Black tennis player to win the U.S. Open (1968) and Wimbledon (1975) and used his platform to begin making public statements to the press about civil rights, Black power, poverty, and even South African apartheid. In 1981, Ashe taught a college course on Black athletes at Florida Memorial College in Miami, which led him to publish a three volume set: A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African American Athlete (Wiggins, 2014, pp. 381–84).

Now, athletes like Arthur Ashe were outliers rather than the norm. The majority of Black athletes were too focused on their careers to worry about marching and boycotting. Boxer George Foreman supported John Carlos and Tommie Smith, but he opted to raise an American flag rather than a Black fist after winning a gold medal in the 1968 Olympics, choosing not to follow Muhammad Ali’s example of sacrificing his boxing career for the sake of social justice. Michael Jordan’s success is the byproduct of the Black athletes who chose to agitate and those who also chose to remain silent.

On June 19, 1984, the Chicago Bulls selected Jordan with the third pick in the NBA draft, and his success can be partly attributed to the fact that he played there for twelve years, as Chicago is one of the biggest sports markets in America. Unlike other major cities like Boston, it is one of the first cities to promote Black athletes as local heroes. Ernie Banks (Chicago Cubs), Gayle Sayers (Chicago Bears), and Walter Payton (Chicago Bears) were among the city’s earliest Black sports icons. The acceptance of Black sports stars does not mean that race was not a factor in the city. For decades, Chicago was considered one of the most segregated cities (residentially) in the North. Over the course of the twentieth
century, the city experienced racial strife and uprisings as Whites resisted civil rights through various methods, like housing discrimination, police brutality, and even the murder of notable Black leaders like Fred Hampton, Jr. (The 21-year-old Hampton was gunned down by White police officers as he slept in his apartment.)

In 1982, two years before the Bulls drafted Jordan, Blacks from Chicago’s impoverished South Side elected the city’s first Black mayor, Harold Washington. Mayor Washington came to office as Chicago was still dealing with past issues of racial inequality, in addition to increasing gang violence in poor Black communities. Against this tumultuous backdrop, Michael Jordan rose to basketball superstardom. Jordan’s athletic success shielded him from these problems of the city’s Black masses. His top priority was defeating their Eastern Conference rival, the Detroit Pistons, which he did in 1991 en route to winning the first of six championships and an Olympic gold medal with the Dream Team, not civil rights.

After he retired in 1999, Jordan became the team president of the Washington, D.C., Wizards NBA franchise. Nearly a decade earlier, Washington, D.C., was the murder capital of the nation due to the crack cocaine epidemic. By 2001, gentrification improved conditions in much of the city; however, many of the city’s poor Black communities still suffered from rampant violence, high incarceration rates of young Black males, and some of the lowest performing public schools in the country. Once again Jordan appeared to ignore local issues to focus on the game of basketball. Although he should not have been expected to become a social activist in D.C. (or Chicago), his voice would have carried tremendous weight.

Jordan took a hiatus from his duties as an executive to play for the Wizards at the age of 38. The Wizards sold out the Verizon Center during Jordan’s time as a player, and local businesses (which were mostly White-owned) prospered from the Wizards’ boost in attendance. Jordan, bothered by bad knees and nagging injuries, retired after two seasons with Washington and expected to return to his role as team president before eventually gaining majority ownership of the team. However, the Wizards’ older Jewish American owner, Abe Polin, had other plans for the future of his prized possession and fired Jordan. Retired Georgetown University men’s basketball coach, John Thompson, Jr. (the first Black coach to win a NCAA championship in 1984 and an outspoken figure on race relations), compared Polin’s use of Jordan to a slave owner exploiting his gifted Black laborers to earn profits for the plantation (Rhoden, 2007, p. 210). Nevertheless, Jordan became a minority owner of the Charlotte Bobcats in 2006 while they were owned by billionaire Robert L. Johnson, the founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET) and first African American owner of a major American sports franchise. Within the next four years, Jordan assumed ownership of the team.
THE BURDEN OF MAINSTREAM SUCCESS

How did Michael Jordan become the world’s most polarizing Black billionaire and a case study for social responsibility? During the late 1980s and early 1990s, he replaced Earvin “Magic” Johnson, Julius “Dr. J.” Erving, and O. J. Simpson (prior to the 1995 murder case) as America’s most beloved Black athlete. He was a multiple winner of the *Sports Illustrated* man of the year award and graced the cover of *GQ*, *TIME*, *Ebony*, and *Jet*. He appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman* and hosted *Saturday Night Live*. He made public service announcements for drug abuse and HIV/AIDS prevention and costarred alongside Bugs Bunny in the 1996 live-action/animated film *Space Jam* (which grossed $230 million worldwide). He even had his own sandwich at McDonalds called the McJordan. When he retired in 1993, he was earning $4 million from McDonalds, $4 million from Sara Lee, $3 million from Wheaties, and $2 million from Gatorade annually. By 1997, his endorsements earned him $100 million (LaFaeber, 2002, p. 123). Jordan’s success on Madison Avenue paved the way for other Black athletes.

Jordan was adored for many reasons. First, Americans love winners and he was the consummate winner. Second, he did not just win, he did it with style and swagger. He carried himself in a manner that appealed to young Black males looking for a hero. Both Black and White women admired Jordan’s play in addition to his handsome looks and charismatic personality. This was ironic because Jordan did not fit mainstream White America’s traditional standards of beauty. He was lanky, dark skinned, and shaved his head at a time when such a look was still threatening to some Whites. For example, Georgetown University basketball player Michael Graham was viewed as a thug for shaving his head in 1984. The last time America had such a dominant Black athlete whose appearance closely resembled Jordan’s, race riots broke out across the nation. John Arthur “Jack” Johnson, a professional boxer from Galveston, Texas, defeated Tommy Burns in 1908 to become boxing’s first Black heavyweight champion. Two years later, Johnson defeated the former undefeated heavyweight champion James J. Jeffries on the fourth of July, which triggered race riots throughout the country (Burns, 2004).

The late rapper The Notorious B.I.G.’s hit song “Mo Money Mo Problems” could have been Jack Johnson’s motto. As one of the nation’s wealthiest African Americans, he spent his riches on expensive sports cars, jewelry, tailored clothes, and furs. His wealth and celebrity granted him the opportunity to date outside of his race, and he openly dated White women at a time when it was common for Black men to be lynched for sneezing in a White woman’s direction. Johnson’s lifestyle brought about many problems and offended some prominent middle-class
Black leaders, who viewed him as a provocateur with no real agenda for social justice. Booker T. Washington did not approve of Johnson’s lifestyle: “It is unfortunate that a man with money should use it in a way to injure his own people, in the eyes of those who are seeking to uplift his race” (as cited in Ward, 2006, p. 308).

Kevin Gaines (1996) reminds us that in their efforts to prove that they were as good as their White counterparts, nineteenth-century Black elites adhered to a racial uplift ideology that was an offshoot of a “liberation theology” of social advancement. Early twentieth-century Black civil rights leaders were strong proponents of respectability politics. Men considered low class, lazy, and unwilling to educate themselves, like the fictional characters in the controversial *Amos ’n’ Andy* sitcom were not among the favored. Outlaws and “thug niggas” like the folk anti-hero Stagolee weren’t either. The powerbrokers in Black America needed to be respectable, middle-class men who valued hard work, education, leadership, success, and proper behavior (Wright, 2016, pp. 11–12). It was believed that respectability countered negative stereotypes that held down the Black race. As a result, pioneering Black athletes were expected to conduct themselves with class. However, for some Black leaders, respectable behavior was not sufficient. They expected them to use their lofty platforms for the improvement of the African American community.

Jack Roosevelt “Jackie” Robinson did more than just integrate baseball and have a hall of fame career. Robinson was also a strong advocate for civil rights. In 1958, he wrote President Dwight Eisenhower about his mishandling of racial strife at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, respectively, about the violence against Blacks in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama (Robinson, 1963, 1965). Robinson wrote the following to President Johnson in 1965: “It’s important you take immediate action in Alabama, one more day of savage treatment by legalized hatchet men could lead to open warfare by aroused Negroes. America cannot afford this in 1965.” The NAACP awarded Robinson with a Spingarn Medal, its most prestigious honor, for his tireless commitment to social activism following his retirement from playing baseball. Martin Luther King, Jr., another Spingarn recipient, once said of Robinson, that he “was a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides” (Burns, 2016).

Michael Jordan did not face the prejudice that Jackie Robinson experienced and did not follow Robinson’s lead in the area of civil rights, but he did follow Robinson’s example of respectable behavior. Jordan was well-mannered, articulate, and college-educated, with a degree in geography. Jordan was not outspoken on politics or issues of race like Muhammad Ali. Unlike Jack Johnson and the outspoken...
civil rights–era sports figures decades later, Jordan preferred to play the role of the all-American hero rather than the villain. In a scene from Spike Lee’s 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, Pino (John Turturro), a racist Italian American pizzeria worker, said guys like Magic Johnson are not really Black: “They are Black, but they’re not really Black.” In other words, their athletic superiority designated them as a special type of Negro that was worthy of his acceptance and adulation. Jordan’s name could have easily been inserted in place of his rival Magic. Such mainstream acceptance has become a burden for Jordan and fellow Black athletes even as it made them incredibly wealthy.

**THE GODFATHER OF GENERATION "ME"**

During an October 23, 2005, interview with Ed Bradley for CBS’s *60 Minutes*, Jordan was asked about the criticism of his commitment to social issues. He told Bradley that his job was to play basketball. He did not live to please everybody and it is a heavy burden to do so. Since his rookie season in the NBA, he has always appeared to be more concerned with his own success than that of the larger group. Jordan is a byproduct of the “me” generation that emerged after the “we” generation of the sixties and previous decades. Historian Robin D. G. Kelley (personal communication, 2009) speaks of the representation of this change of philosophies in the 1973 Blaxploitation film *The Mack*. In the film, Goldie, a fictional pimp obsessed with making money at all costs, is in conflict with his big brother Olinga, a Black nationalist (based on Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton) dedicated to community uplift. Kelley says after the modern-day Civil Rights movement ended Blacks had to decide whether they would devote their time to making money and transitioning into the mainstream or continue to fight for social justice.

During the last 20 years, prominent Black athletes like Allen Iverson, Floyd Mayweather, Jr., and Cam Newton have been accused of having a “me first” attitude. In *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, The Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture*, Todd Boyd (2008) characterizes Jordan as the godfather of this selfish behavior. Sam Smith’s (1991) controversial book *The Jordan Rules* reveals many unpleasant secrets about Jordan’s extreme egocentricity, such as his skipping a mandatory team trip to the White House to gamble and play golf at a Hilton Head resort in South Carolina and initially refusing to wear a Reebok warm-up suit bearing the nation’s colors for the closing ceremonies because he had a contract with Nike. Jordan has never had a problem choosing his own desires over those of the larger group. As a result, he has often been criticized for choosing riches and White America’s adulation over issues that would benefit
the majority of African Americans. Two notable examples involve civil rights issues in his home state of North Carolina.

In 1992, a group of Black students at UNC, Jordan’s alma mater, demanded that the university build a center for the study of Black culture, which would have also housed a library named in Michael Jordan’s honor. Jordan’s mother, Delores, was contacted and she openly supported the idea. After the university’s chancellor, Paul Hardin, failed to, 12 Black UNC football players led a march of 400 students to Hardin’s home. Jordan declined to support the drive for the center, arguing that any new building projects should be dedicated to the entire student body and not limited to a particular race or ethnic group. I wonder if Jordan really felt this way or if he worried about the potential financial ramifications of having his name associated with a “Black” center.

Four years later, Harvey Gantt, a Black Democrat, challenged Republican incumbent Jesse Helms for his Senate seat. Helms, a segregationist, famously ran a television campaign ad six years earlier featuring a pair of White hands holding a letter informing the individual that he had lost his job because of affirmative action quotas and even staged a filibuster to prevent the extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in 1982. He furthermore voted against the establishment of a holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. North Carolina Blacks expected Jordan to publicly support Gantt, but he refused to do so, stating that “Republicans buy sneakers, too.” Michael Jordan is Nike’s top spokesman, and the Jordan brand earned $2.6 billion in 2013, commanding a 58% market share of the $4.2 billion US basketball shoe market (Badenhausen, 2015). The shoes have made Jordan a transcendent, global icon and even more polarizing figure within the African American community.

“I WANNA BE, I WANNA BE LIKE MIKE”

In 1984, Jordan’s agent David Falk worked out a deal with Nike, a then moderately successful shoe company owned by Phil Knight, to distribute Jordan’s own signature line of sneakers. The Nike Air Jordan quickly became the most popular sneaker on America’s playgrounds because of Jordan’s success on the court and Nike’s brilliant marketing strategy. Spike Lee’s television commercials for Nike paired the straight-laced Jordan with the wise cracking, hip hop b-boy Mars Blackmon. “Money, it’s gotta be the shoes,” became Mars’s famous line used to explain Jordan’s success. Jordan represented the mainstream while Mars represented the working-class Black community and the anti-establishment attitude of the emerging hip hop culture. By hiking the price up to more than $100, the Jordans (also known as Js) became a must have item for young people (especially Black
youth). Rappers and hip hop celebrities began wearing Jordans in their videos and name dropping the sneakers in their songs.

Jordan’s financial empire has grown exponentially over the last 30 years as a result of his relationship with Nike. The Jordan brand is largely responsible for Nike’s annual sales of $16 billion. Air Jordan sneakers released 30 years ago retail for nearly $200. But there is a price for so much success. A scene in the 2015 comedic film *Dope* features gang members robbing high school students for their Jordans, and since the late eighties, these sneakers have been associated with violence in Black communities. A 1990 *Sports Illustrated* article about the violence associated with Air Jordans told the story of Michael Eugene Thomas, a 15-year-old high school student in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, who was found strangled by a 17-year-old friend who killed him for his shoes. Thomas loved his $115 sneakers so much that he cleaned them every night before bed. His lifeless body was found barefoot in a wooded area near his school.

Jordan responded to the violence by stating that he always thought kids would emulate his positive attributes. He said the fact that kids were killing each other for his shoes forced him to reevaluate his decision-making and the message he was sending the public (Telander, 1990). Twenty-five years have passed since the *Sport Illustrated* article, but Air Jordans are still associated with violence. When Nike released its $180 retro Air Jordan XI Concords days before Christmas 2011, the result was widespread violence and shopping mall stampedes across the nation. In a 2011 article, ESPN2 *His & Hers* cohost Jemele Hill pointed out that many of the victims associated with sneaker violence were young Black males and charged Jordan with exploiting the African American community to enhance his financial empire (Hill, 2011).

Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1997) criticized members of the Black elite for becoming distracted by the trappings of mainstream society. Frazier accused these individuals of being so concerned with conspicuous consumption and the good life that they were blind to important social issues. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) said that, “If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men.” Upper class Blacks, especially professional athletes like Michael Jordan, have been burdened with these expectations to do more with their privileged status in the decades following the civil rights era. This same burden has been placed on Black athletes following in his footsteps. Four notable examples are Eldrick “Tiger” Woods, Kobe Bryant, Serena Williams, and LeBron James.

Race is a hard thing to ignore when discussing Tiger Woods. His father was an African American Vietnam War veteran and his mother is of Thai, Chinese, and Dutch descent. When he became the first “Black” man to win professional
golf’s Masters tournament in 1997, it was hailed as a victory for Black America. He was walking in the footsteps of men like Charles Sifford, the first African American to play on the PGA Tour. Tiger fit all of the respectable standards of the Black middle class. He was handsome, educated at Stanford University for two years before turning pro, well-spoken, and always carried himself in a dignified manner. He was the most successful athlete on and off the playing field since Jordan. He won 14 major championships between 1997 and 2007 and in 2009, became the first athlete with a net worth over $1 billion (“Tiger Woods,” n.d.). He put his money to good use by giving $30 million to underprivileged youth through the Tigers Woods Foundation (Hursh, 2015). Nevertheless, Woods has also been criticized for many of Jordan’s perceived faults.

The late renowned political scientist Ronald Walters (2002) lambasted Woods in an op-ed for not speaking out against private golf clubs that excluded Blacks, Jews, women, and other minorities for decades and accused him of following in Jordan’s footsteps by remaining quiet on injustices that favored him financially. After Woods won the 1997 Masters, one of his competitors, Frank “Fuzzy” Zoeller, told reporters that he hoped that he would refrain from serving fried chicken and collard greens at the Masters dinner the following year (“Golfer Says Comments,” 1997). Tiger excused Fuzzy’s ignorance by telling the media that he has always viewed him as a “jokester” (www.sportsbusinessdaily.com). In 2008, Woods’s friend Kelly Tilghman, a White Golf Channel anchor, joked during a televised broadcast that his rivals should “lynch him in the back alley” if they want to beat him, yet he excused this egregious choice of words, opting to avoid a public discussion on race relations.

The newly retired Kobe Bryant entered the NBA the same year that Tiger turned pro. For the next decade, these two men were arguably the best athletes in the nation. After growing up in Italy, in an environment with few Blacks, Bryant returned to the States to play high school ball in the upscale suburbs of Pennsylvania. In 1996, a 17-year-old Bryant skipped college to enter the NBA. Since his rookie season with the Los Angeles Lakers, Bryant has been called baby MJ because he plays like Jordan and sounds like him in interviews. Jordan wore his college practice shorts under his uniform each game and Bryant, who didn’t attend college, copied him by wearing his high school team’s practice shorts under his Lakers uniform.

Much like his idol, Bryant has experienced scathing criticism within the Black community. “Bryant doesn’t identify with the struggle that our African American youth face nationally. So why should we continue to support Bryant who has never truly identified with the African American experience,” said Najee Ali, director of Project Islamic H.O.P.E. (“Kobe Bryant Takes Shots,” 2014). Jim Brown, an NFL
Hall of Famer and activist since the 1960s, called for a boycott of Kobe Bryant–
endorsed products following his remarks about the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin,
an unarmed 17-year-old Black youth in Sanford, Florida. While the majority of polled
African Americans believed that Martin’s killer, George Zimmerman, a self-appointed
neighborhood watch coordinator, was guilty of racially profiling, Bryant chose
not to condemn Zimmerman until he thought he had all of the facts, tweeting that
he was not going to favor one perspective over another just because he is a Black
man. However, Bryant later revealed to ESPN’s Jemele Hill that his initial com-
ments about Zimmerman were based on his own past experience with the legal
system after he was falsely accused of rape in 2003. Bryant did eventually admit
that he could have better explained his initial response and spoke privately with the
parents of Trayvon Martin (Medina, 2014).

Jim Brown has been actively engaged in civil rights struggles since the 1960s
and has voiced his critiques of other athletes who haven’t done the same. He ac-
cused Kobe Bryant of being out of touch with the struggles of most Blacks living
in America because of his childhood. Bryant (2013) responded by posting the
following tweet: “A ‘Global’ African American is an inferior shade to ‘American’
African Americans?? #hmm. . . that doesn’t sound very #Mandela or #DrKing sir.”
Jim Brown’s criticism speaks to a bigger issue within the Black community. ESPN2
First Take cohost Stephen A. Smith said in response to Brown’s attack on Bryant
that too many people within the Black community expect all Blacks to be mono-
lithic. In other words, certain viewpoints and behaviors are expected in order to
maintain acceptance with other African Americans (Jonny Deep, 2013).

Brown’s opinion speaks to a question: does an African American have to
express concern over social issues that large numbers of Blacks find important in
order to maintain acceptance within the Black community? The current ABC sit-
com Black-ish regularly addresses this dilemma that some more fortunate Blacks
experience. The lead character, Dre (played by Anthony Anderson), worries that
his upper-class children, who have grown up in a predominantly White environ-
ment, have no sense of Blackness because they are blind to “the struggle” that less
fortunate Blacks have had to overcome and feels the need to “keep it real” at all
times to make sure they do not sell-out and lose touch with the Black community.

Toure (2011), cohost of MSNBC’s The Cycle, addresses this issue of Black-
In the book, Michael Eric Dyson defines three dimensions of Blackness: acciden-
tal, incidental, and intentional. The accidental Black person is Black only by birth,
the incidental Black person believes that their race is important but it does
not define them or dominate their personality, and the intentional Black per-
son is an individual that loves their race and is extroverted in their embrace of
Blackness. Toure places Jim Brown in this last category. Using his logic, Woods would fall in the accidental category, Bryant and Jordan fall in the incidental category, and Serena Williams and LeBron James fall in the intentional category.

Since 1999, Serena Williams has dominated women’s professional tennis with 34 Grand Slam titles, four Olympic Gold medals, and has been ranked number one in the world six times since 2002 (Gales, 2012). Williams has broken barriers in a sport historically dominated by upper-class Whites and has refused to play at a mandatory tournament in Indian Wells, California, since 2001 due to racial taunts from spectators targeting her and her family. In her autobiography, Williams said that a million dollar fine for not playing in the tournament would be worth standing up to racism (Novy-Williams, 2013). As a Black woman, Williams faces the double burden of not just addressing issues of race but also gender and has been a strong advocate for Title IX and equal pay for female tennis players. In 2012, she and her sister, Venus, visited Nigeria, South Africa, and other African nations to encourage girls and young women to not only play tennis, but also to challenge barriers based on gender and race (Mark, 2012).

LeBron James, like Serena Williams, proves that Black athletes do not have to choose between individual wealth and communal uplift. The Cleveland Cavaliers drafted James after his senior year at St. Vincent-St. Mary High School in Akron, Ohio, during the summer of 2003. James (also known as King James) soon replaced Bryant and Woods as Michael Jordan’s successor as the world’s most marketable athlete. On the surface, James appears to be quite different from Jordan, Bryant, and Woods. Unlike the others, who came from stable two-parent middle- or upper-class households, James grew up in the hood. He is the son of a teenage single mother and a father who was absent his entire life. Such an upbringing may have influenced his future stance on activism and his commitment to bettering the African American community.

James shocked the world when he announced, during an hour long ESPN special called The Decision, he was leaving Cleveland to “take his talents to South Beach” and play for the Miami Heat. Fans, infuriated by their loss, burned his jersey in the streets in Ohio, and others posted racist tweets. Dan Gilbert, the owner of the Cavaliers, posted a nasty letter on the team’s website denigrating his character and calling him a poor role model for children. But not everyone found fault with his “decision.” The Rev. Jesse Jackson and Spike Lee likened Gilbert’s comments to a patriarchal slave master upset that one his chattel had escaped his plantation and Jamal Ratchford (2012) viewed it as an act of self-determination and pride that harkens back to the Black Power movement of the sixties (pp. 77–80).

In 2014, James resigned with Cleveland. In a three-page essay on Sports Illustrated.com, he admitted to forgiving Cavalier’s owner Dan Gilbert. He said that
he was returning home not only to win a championship, but to uplift a community
that was suffering from economic hardship.

I feel like my calling here goes above basketball. I have a responsibility to
lead. . . . I want kids in Northeast Ohio to realize that there’s no better place
to grow up. Maybe some of them will come home after college and start a
family or open a business. . . . Our community, which has struggled so much,
needs all the talent it can get. (James, 2014)

Black sports journalists and media figures praised him for returning to Cleveland.
ESPN’s Kevin Blackistone, for example, referred to this as a political move, call-
ing James an activist. Jason Whitlock (2014), an ESPN personality, emphasized
a deeper message James was indirectly sending young Black men, that James’s
mission is to empower young Black men and women in the city. In his interview
with James’s childhood friend and manager, Maverick Carter told Whitlock that
James embraces his responsibility as a role model for African Americans and real-
izes that his mission is greater than making money.

As part of James’s efforts to empower other young Black men and set a good
eexample for other Black athletes, he formed a sports management company, LRMR
(LeBron, Richard, Maverick and Randy), in 2006 with Carter (the CEO) and two
other buddies from Akron, Rich Paul and Randy Mims. In addition, James left the
Creative Artists Agency and his agent Leon Rose (a 47-year-old White attorney) in
2012 to sign with the newly formed Klutch Sports Group, which was founded by
his friend and new agent Rich Paul, a Black man in his early 30s who once sold
throwback athletic jerseys out of his trunk. James has, furthermore, been vocal
on several social issues. He participated in a silent protest during the Trayvon
Martin controversy, was outspoken during the 2014 Donald Sterling controversy,
and appeared in television commercials supporting Obama’s Affordable Care Act
(Feldman, 2014). In addition, he tweeted support for former NBA player Jason
Collins’s announcement that he was gay and was elected vice-president of the
NBA players union in 2014. Finally, during the warm-up session before a game
in New York City, James wore an “I can’t breathe” T-shirt in support of the family
of Eric Garner, a Black man who died after being placed in a chokehold by White
police officers in Staten Island on July 17, 2014. James chose to make this state-
ment on a night the British Royals, Prince William and his wife, Catherine, were
in attendance for the game (Payne, 2014).

James and Williams were among a significant number of professional Black
athletes who engaged in social media activism during the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri,
protests following the death of Michael Brown. James posted an illustrated picture
of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown walking together on his Twitter page and
Williams tweeted, “Wow. Just wow. Shameful. What will it take???” Even Bryant chimed in with, “The system enables young black men to be killed behind the mask of law. #Ferguson.” Although this may not compare to the protests of Muhammad Ali and the 1968 Olympic sprinters, this is the closest thing contemporary athletes have to the Civil Rights movement of previous decades. In January 2016 LeBron James was criticized by the mother of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Black boy fatally shot by a police officer in Cleveland, for not speaking out on her son’s behalf. David Zirin, the sports editor for The Nation, questioned LeBron’s promise in his 2014 Sports Illustrated essay that he was returning to the Land (slang for Cleveland) to uplift the community and be a voice for change as a result of his silence. This just goes to show that even when Black athletes speak out, that still might not be enough for some people.

CONCLUSION

HBO Real Sports host Bryant Gumbel and writer Zadie Smith offer valuable insight to consider before condemning Michael Jordan and other Black athletes like him. Gumble once remarked during a 2000 episode of ESPN SportsCentury that it was unfair to expect Michael Jordan to uplift a race of people because of his skin color. In her 2008 essay, “Speaking Tongues,” Smith further argued that Blackness should not be defined by specific categories and parameters, that it is fluid and evolving (as cited in Toure, pp. 19–20). Jordan has always been powerful enough to have been socially active without a loss of popularity, but he is no less Black than Jim Brown or Bill Russell because of his lack of social consciousness. I would make the same argument for Kobe Bryant and Tiger Woods. Certainly, it is great to see Black athletes who are willing to speak up on issues, give back, and take leadership roles that benefit others. But it is unfair to pigeonhole Jordan and the majority of Black athletes and unrealistic to expect them to be socially conscious because the African American community is not homogenous. All Blacks, regardless of social status, are not motivated to be activists. Wealth and fame provides a platform, but it does not make an individual qualified to lead. Rather than continuing to berate, boycott, and shame Black athletes who do not address issues that benefit the African American community, as well as other minorities, generous encouragement is in order to embolden those who have chosen to serve as change agents.

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