The Enduring Color Line in U.S. Athletics

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A cool fall morning, black and gold everything, everywhere. I am running and screaming down the field as my kindergartener scores his second touchdown of the day. I feel the familiar sense of pride that outstanding athletic performances can give. My son is the size of an eight-year-old and outweighs the others by at least 10 pounds, but he can run fast enough to make it down the field untouched. People are already discussing his future National Football League (NFL) career with me – even though he is only five years old. As a mom I am proud, as a sociologist, I am cautious and protective, not wanting him to begin to develop an identity around his athletic talents. Half-time rolls around and we are up by two touchdowns in a flag football game for preschoolers and kindergarteners that does not officially keep score. Yet the parents and everyone in the league know that our team is undefeated. Equipped with my black-and-gold “Football Mom” t-shirt, I prepare to escort my son across the field for our half-time Homecoming festivities. I look around and realize the importance of this ritual. Collectively, the amount of money, time, energy, and shared emotion invested on this field make this peewee football league the primary focus for many of the families in our large suburban neighborhood.

I am no stranger to this way of life. Throughout my own childhood, my household was structured around sports. My brothers played football, basketball, and baseball. I was a gymnast and track and field star. For as long as I can remember, Saturdays meant baseball diamonds, football fields, track and field stadiums, basketball courts, and long hours practicing back
handsprings and double twisting layouts. It was simply life as usual for my family and most of the families that I knew. I had an anonymous sponsor paying for my track and field travel and equipment by the time I was 10, and my brother had professional baseball scouts at his games as a pre-teen. My oldest brother went on to play Division I basketball in college on a full scholarship, my middle brother played over a decade in the Major League Baseball (MLB) system, and I ran track on a full scholarship earning a Division I collegiate All-American honor. Sports have been the biggest part of my life for most of my life, and have shaped my career as a sociologist and researcher. As a sociologist, former elite athlete, and sister to a thirty-something retired professional athlete, I began to see sports in a different light. I began to uncover systematically the social significance of sport in America and its connection to race and race relations. Sports, as a social construction, influence how people feel, think, and live their lives while reflecting and creating important aspects of culture, shared experiences, and shared identities (Coakley 2010).

Sports make up an important social institution in American society that holds a prominent position as a component of our culture. It is one of the great pillars of American industry as a profitable form of entertainment closely connected to the economy, education, family, and many other spheres of social life in America. Accordingly, this important American institution has generated several areas of interest in the study of society and human behavior. Sociologists and other scholars have noted the many fascinating phenomena that exist in youth, collegiate, and professional athletics. Sports mirror the human experience (Eitzen 2012): the triumphs, the trials, the excitement, the defeat, the victories, and the drive to win and overcome adversity. They are a microcosm of society and reflect both the great successes and ills of American life. In this book, my co-author and I examine the relationship between race and sport in America; how sport has
both reflected and influenced modern race relations. We will emphasize the intersection of race and sport and dissect the ever-prominent racial components of youth, collegiate, and elite athletics.