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Positional Play: Racial Stereotyping in Rugby League

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Introduction

Chappell (1995) has drawn attention to research that has identified the ways in which racial stereotyping can dictate the involvement of black athletes in British sport. Following Cashmore (1982) he suggests that stereotyping serves to present sport as a legitimate area for success for young blacks, but that stereotyping also serves to restrict the positions in which black athletes are allowed to play (Wedderburn, 1989 & Maguire, 1991). We now have further evidence of the racial dimension of sport from a study of rugby league recently conducted by a team from Leeds Metropolitan University on behalf of the Rugby League, the Commission for Racial Equality, and Leeds City Council (Long et al, forthcoming). That study involved:

- a) a postal questionnaire sent to the chairman, secretary, coach and head physio/trainer, or their equivalent, at each club in the Rugby League (with a response rate of 60%);
- b) a survey of rugby league fans via self-completed questionnaires administered at four matches (2,634 completed questionnaires represented an overall response rate of 70%); and,
- c) in depth interviews with 16 players (eight black and eight white).

Black Representation in Rugby League

The first black player in the League (Lucian Banks) played for Hunslet over 80 years ago. Since then there have been others, often arriving as refugees from Welsh rugby union, and some major figureheads: for example, Cec Thompson (the first black international in 1951); the legendary Billy Boston; and Clive Sullivan who captained Great Britain in the early seventies. That historic representation contributes to the illusion of an absence of racism in the sport.

However, it is only relatively recently that there have been more than a handful of black players at one time, some of whom (like Martin Offiah and Ellery Hanley) have had a notably high profile. Table 1 presents data on the representation of ethnic minority players in the first teams (including substitutes) of all first division rugby league clubs for fixtures over one September weekend at the beginning of the 1994/95 season.

[Table 1 about here]

On the same weekend in Division 2, there were 18 players (out of 240) of African-Caribbean origin and no Asian players. Seven clubs had no players from ethnic minorities playing on the day.

So, excluding the Polynesian players¹, 7.9% of the players were black. Even allowing for the greater concentration of the black population in the younger age groups (ignored by Chappell) and the regional variations (significant for an essentially regional game), this is a relatively high representation of African-Caribbean players. On the same basis, however, Asians are clearly under-represented; in the 1994/5 season there was only one player of Asian descent playing in the Rugby League.

As with soccer, black people are notable by their absence in the stands and on the terraces. On the four survey days, with an aggregate crowd of some 31,000 spectators, the survey teams recorded only 24 black fans. Despite offering an exciting spectacle, featuring some high class black players, rugby league clearly has not yet managed to appeal to black sports fans (but it is difficult to identify a sport that has done in Britain). While black athletes may have to tolerate racism for the sake of playing their sport, there are plenty of other leisure activities competing for the attention and spending of potential black spectators.

¹ Players of Polynesian descent have a long history in the game, and constitute the majority of rugby league players in New Zealand. Although they are described as 'black' by white Australians, and some of the officials in our survey, there is a 'colour-blindness' fed by their playing ability (as signings from overseas they must

'Stacking' in Rugby League

There is clear indication of 'stacking' (the disproportionate (under) representation of black players in certain positions) in rugby league. On the same survey weekend at the beginning of the season, of the black UK players: five were forwards, 13 wingers, one a utility back and one plays anywhere (i.e. 75% are backs, 65% wingers). Of the black UK players in the second division, seven were forwards and eleven were wingers. Of all the UK players from ethnic minorities in both divisions, none were in the scrum half or stand-off position, and only one was in the hooking role. For whatever reason then, black players do not appear in the key decision-making positions. In the history of the game, only one black player has ever played in a professional team as a scrum half (the key position in rugby league).

This 'stacking' is no accident. It could be explained in part by the desires of black players themselves following in the footsteps of previous stars who provide role models; once patterns are established they gain their own momentum and are perpetuated. However, stereotypes are especially significant when they become established in the minds of the powerful.

The survey of officials at all the clubs of the Rugby League identified many stereotypical views², especially among the chairmen. Most of their comments were based on beliefs that African-Caribbeans are in fact well suited to rugby league, being 'naturally athletic', 'fast, elusive runners' or with 'good upper body strength'; hence the 'stacking' in the positions of wing and second row forward. However, there were also those who suggested limitations, questioning cognitive and motivational characteristics. Negative characteristics, though, were more commonly attributed to Asian players: 'small stature'; 'low tolerance of pain'; 'culturally non-violent and not competitive or aggressive'; having 'skills more suited to football or cricket', etc. These negative assessments do not bear close scrutiny. Moreover they certainly came from a minority, but they are influential people.

perform to a high standard to obtain work permits), which encourages fans to recognise these players as being 'one of us'.

² It should be noted, though, that the majority of respondents identified no special characteristics that suited or limited those from ethnic minorities in playing the game (or playing in particular positions).

Racism in Rugby League

So we have a situation in which club officials (especially chairmen - and they are all men) tend to identify positive attributes suiting African-Caribbean players to rugby league, but still commonly see these in terms of a limited number of positions. In addition to the stereotyping, the surveys also identified a certain amount of more overt racism, predominantly in the form of abuse from the terraces. This was identified by all the players (black and white) and almost half the fans, and a third of the officials had heard abusive chanting against black players at their own grounds. Although this is not seen to be on anything like the scale witnessed in soccer, it was evident from the responses of both players and officials that it is not confined just to a few rogue clubs.

Perhaps more significantly, all the black players and some of the white players were also aware of racist abuse coming from some opposition players. For some this was seen to be malicious and for others a 'winding-up' tactic intended 'to put a guy off his game.' In either case physical educationists can play their part in emphasising to players at the start of their careers that such racism has no place in sport.

Conclusion

Whereas white players were most commonly introduced to clubs by family members or friends, that avenue is less often open to black players, simply because of the way in which the game has developed. In such circumstances the black players interviewed had had to find alternative routes into the game. Clearly physical educationists have an important role to play in trying to ensure that talent is not overlooked. Only one player referred to the role of a teacher in encouraging his talent for rugby league, and that was an English teacher, but that may be the fate of most sports treated as minority interests within the educational system. Wedderburn (1989) drew attention to the use of stereotypes by PE teachers, consolidating the 'stacking' phenomenon. Although not investigated formally in our study, this was also alluded to by one of our respondents.

All teachers know the significance of expectation in affecting performance. Historical developments, social networks, role models and stereotyping all play a part in determining the part played by black athletes, but we should not be coy about the role of racism in sport. Even in rugby league, which our research suggests is nowhere near the worst sport, some of our respondents identified players who had given-up because it was not worth the 'aggro' caused by encountering and having to deal with racism.

Armed with the findings of the research, the sponsors of the research are currently working on their plan of action, and clearly physical educationists should expect to play their part in ensuring the fullest possible development of sporting talent.

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Table 1: Players From Ethnic Minorities in First Division Rugby League Teams (September 1994)

Total number of players	=	240	
Number not white English <i>of whom</i>	=	54	(22.5%)
number of English non-white <i>of whom</i>	=	20	(8.3%)
African-Caribbean from traditional RL areas	=	14	
African-Caribbean from other areas	=	5	
Asian descent	=	1	
number of overseas 'imports' <i>of whom</i>	=	34	(14.2%)
Polynesian/mixed origin from S. Pacific	=	19	
European origin from Australasia	=	11	
European nationals (French)	=	3	
South African (Afrikaner)	=	1	

4 clubs had no players from UK ethnic minorities

6 clubs had one

4 clubs had two

2 clubs had three

[2 clubs had no players from overseas]