



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

---

Citation:

Kilvington, D (2024) Editorial Understanding and challenging discrimination in sports. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10 (1). pp. 1-5. ISSN 2331-1886 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2422011>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/11563/>

Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

---

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

© 2024 the author(s)

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

# Understanding and challenging discrimination in sports

Daniel Kilvington

To cite this article: Daniel Kilvington (2024) Understanding and challenging discrimination in sports, Cogent Social Sciences, 10:1, 2422011, DOI: [10.1080/23311886.2024.2422011](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2422011)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2422011>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Nov 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 584



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Understanding and challenging discrimination in sports

### Introduction

Sports harbors a long, unsettling, and troubling history with discrimination. Sports and discrimination are intertwined, despite perceptions of sports being inherently meritocratic. Often, we hear that athlete success is based on talent, hard work, and dedication. Those who ‘make it’ are there because they deserve it; those who do not, however, are perceived responsible for their own failures. This is a worrying position and one that subscribes to living in a post-racial or post-sexist world. Sport is no different or special – the systemic obstacles that exist in wider society, found in housing, education, healthcare, and the media, are equally rooted in the global sporting infrastructure. Therefore, it is crucial that we not only attempt to critically understand discrimination in sports but also consider and present ways to challenge it. This new *Sport and Discrimination* section is perfectly poised to provide a platform whereby world-leading research can be gathered, a network can blossom, and recommendations or attempts to challenge inequity and injustice in the context of sports can be highlighted and promoted.

### Sport and discrimination: setting the scene

The Olympic Games, a mega-event in the truest sense, attracted a global television audience of 3.05 billion at the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020. However, it has a checkered past with regard to discriminatory practices. For example, female athletes were excluded from the first modern Olympics in Athens 1896 but were allowed to compete in Paris in 1900, as 22 women took part out of a total of 997 athletes. Women were banned from competing in marathon events, a symbol of endurance and perseverance, until Los Angeles (1984). It was not until London 2012 that all countries had women athletes taking part. That said, there are intersectional obstacles that exclude female athletes. At the Paris Games 2024, French basketball player, Diaba Konate, was banned from playing for the French team due to a rule change enforced by the French Basketball Federation (FFBB) in 2022 which prohibits kits ‘with a religious or political connotation’ (Chohan, 2024). Despite progress for women at the Olympics, this serves as a reminder that some women, such as Konate, who wears the hijab, encounter exclusionary policies.

Akin with gender, the Olympics also shares a troubling past surrounding ‘race’ and ethnicity. Following the St. Louis Olympics in 1904, a related event was established, called the ‘Special Olympics’, which was later named ‘Anthropology Days’. This additional competition, James Edward Sullivan and William McGee, the founding president of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the National Geographic Society, respectively, was set up to ‘measure the inferiority of primitive peoples’ (Longley, 2021). The event, which later became known as the ‘Savage Games’, brought together people from the ‘non-industrialized world’, notably from Africa and Asia. The organizers created exhibitions, which highlighted ‘primitive ways’ including tree climbing and mud throwing, helping reinforce the notion of White superiority. The founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who actually opposed the ‘female Olympiad’, strongly rejected the ‘Savage Games’, criticising them vehemently. Since then, trailblazers and sporting icons such as John Taylor, Jesse Owens, Wilma Rudolph, John Carlos, Tommie Smith, Muhammad Ali, Serena Williams and Simone Biles have demonstrated Black excellence to a global audience, challenging racialized stereotypes and social injustice along the way. Despite these successes, racism and racist practices and policies remain evident. Jordan Chiles, who won a silver medal in gymnastics at the Tokyo Games in 2020, recently revealed that she endured racist treatment in

gymnastics. With only 8% of the NCAA female gymnasts being Black, Chiles recounted that she often faced racialized comments relating to her hair and body. Regarding policy, the Soul Cap, a cap designed for Black swimmers' natural hair, was banned from the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020 because of suggestions that it created an unfair advantage. However, after a public backlash, the cap was soon reinstated, along with an accompanying apology.

Despite being perceived as a relatively incident free mega-event, the most recent men's European Championships 2024 in Germany saw 17 games affected by racist chanting, with UEFA sanctioning seven of the 24 teams due to racist or discriminatory behavior by fans. Generally, however, discrimination has largely migrated away from stadiums and can be increasingly found on social media (Kilvington & Price, 2019a, 2019b). UEFA (2024), in collaboration with Meta, TikTok, and X, monitored 696 social media accounts of all individuals involved in the football tournament, including players, coaches, and referees. A total of 9,142 posts were flagged for review during the group stage from 7,810 individual accounts. 92.5% of flagged posts were classified as general abuse, while 5 and 2.5% contained racist and homophobic abuse, respectively. Conversely, FIFA and FIFPRO's (2023) findings, focusing on the women's World Cup 2023 in Australia and New Zealand, identified a higher percentage of hate speech that targeted players' protected characteristics. The research examined X, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube between 19 July and 21 August 2023, encompassing all 64 fixtures. Using Signify's Threat Matrix system, 102,511 posts were flagged as potentially discriminatory, and following a human review, 7,085 posts were deemed discriminatory, abusive, or threatening and reported to the platform. The report illustrates that one in five players at the tournament received targeted online abuse (150 of 697 players). General abuse (23.31%), homophobia (20.40%), and sexualized content (15.03%) were the most common forms of abuse. These reports showcase the different types of abuse that male and female athletes encounter, with women more likely to encounter sexualized threats, homophobia, and violence.

Outside mega-events, such as the Olympics or World Cups, further research has documented the ways in which discrimination permeates the sporting landscape. Research has examined the myriad of barriers that ostracize British South Asians in English professional football (Burdsey, 2007; Kilvington, 2016; Ratna, 2014) and English crickets (Brown et al., 2023; Fletcher, 2014). Meanwhile, research has also explored the experiences and exclusion of minoritized ethnic managers and coaches in the National Football League (NFL) (Cunningham, 2010, 2021), English football (Bradbury, 2013; Rankin-Wright et al., 2016) and reflected on affirmative action approaches such as the Rooney Rule (Kilvington, 2019; Kilvington et al., 2022) while other research has focused on the experiences of female sports coaches (Norman, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2013; Robertson, 2016) and the ways in which coaches shape the disability sport experience (Allan et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2019; Martin & Whalen, 2014). Lake (2019) investigated social exclusion in tennis, focusing closely on class, while Açıkgöz (2022) examined barriers to sports participation among children from lower-class backgrounds within Turkey. Phipps' timely and important research has explored heteronormativity and homophobia in university-based sports (Phipps, 2020), as well as barriers encountered by transgender athletes, again in the university-sport setting (Phipps, 2021). This relates to Athanas-Linden (2024) study on the impact of sex testing on transgender, intersex, and cisgender female athletes. This study investigates the ways in which sports governance policies are used to discriminate between transgender athletes.

Finally, if we look at sports holistically and consider the role of sports media, thus encompassing sports broadcasters, commentators, journalists, content creators, and influencers, we must also acknowledge the systematic ways in which discrimination impacts these spaces. Farrington et al. (2012), Van Sterkenburg and Spaaij (2015), and Kilvington (2021) illustrate the ways in which racialized representations are manifest in sports journalism and commentary, while Campbell and Davis (2024) consider how women Olympians are often stereotypically framed in print media discourses. Kilvington and Price (2021) and Sinclair et al. (2024) have showcased the extent to which sports journalists encounter and receive online abuse, how it affects content, journalistic criticality, and negatively impacts mental health and well-being. Investigations into esports, a burgeoning research field, have found that players' attributes and characteristics are often influenced by racialization (Campbell & Maloney, 2022). Friman et al. (2023) work has critically explored the ways in which Finnish esports organizations aim to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in their activities. Their work put forward several recommendations for increasing such aspects in the Finnish esports scene. It is evident that discrimination is manifested in sports,

affecting every cog of the wheel, imbued in every rung of the ladder. This overview of the literature has attempted to showcase that there are issues, and that research is fundamental in helping to highlight such problems. It is crucial that we do not just stop at identifying or highlighting the issues but also offer solutions for positive and transformative change.

## Conclusion: challenging discrimination in sport

Discrimination in sports is not just a problem that affects players, coaches or fans. Discrimination does not care about the sport or the level of the sport. Discrimination is woven into the sporting infrastructure and impacts everyone from amateur to elite players, coaches, managers, scouts, match officials and referees, in-stadium and online fans, sports journalists, commentators, pundits, content creators, gamers, the list goes on. It is paramount that world-leading research into discrimination in sports is undertaken, compiled, shared, and promoted to academic researchers, practitioners, governing bodies, sports enthusiasts, and more to build a movement that not only understands the complex ways in which discrimination impacts sport but also puts forward research-informed strategies to tackle the myriad forms of discrimination.

*Sport and Discrimination*, the newest section of *Cogent Social Sciences*, welcomes submissions from scholars investigating sports participation, coaching, recruitment, fandom, policy, management and governance, accessibility and inclusivity, and media representations. More broadly, this interdisciplinary section should appeal to scholars from other disciplines, such as media and cultural studies, sports journalism, esports, sport studies, sport sociology, sports law, sports psychology, sports marketing, and Internet studies. Our aim is to build a network of researchers and a corpus of world-leading, impactful, and thought-provoking research that can influence changes in behavior, practice, and policy. We strongly encourage submissions to consider and put forward ways in which discrimination in sports can be destabilized and challenged. There is no quick fix or miracle cure; anti-discrimination efforts and actions take time. Anti-discrimination is a journey, not a destination. I hope you will join in this movement as we are stronger together, united in the cause to make sport truly inclusive, diverse, and equitable for all.

## Acknowledgment

No funding or sponsorship was involved in the creation of this work.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Daniel Kilvington  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3361-0860>

## References

- Açıkgöz, S. (2022). Barriers for sport participation of children with lower-class background in Turkey. In D. Reiche & P. M. Brannagan (Eds.), *Handbook of sport in the Middle East* (pp. 141–149). Routledge.
- Allan, V., Blair Evans, M., Latimer-Cheung, A. E., & Côté, J. (2020). From the athletes' perspective: A social-relational understanding of how coaches shape the disability sport experience. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 32(6), 546–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2019.1587551>
- Athanas-Linden, G. (2024). Sex-testing and discrimination in sport: Upholding an uneven playing field. In S. Lawrence, J. Hill, & R. Mowatt (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of sport, leisure, and social justice* (pp. 99–113). Routledge.
- Bradbury, S. (2013). Institutional racism, whiteness and the under-representation of minorities in leadership positions in football in Europe. *Soccer & Society*, 14(3), 296–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2013.801262>
- Brown, T., Khawaja, I., Powell, A., Greetham, P., Gough, L. A., & Kelly, A. L. (2023). Sociodemographic profile of the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) talent pathways and first-class counties: Considering the British South Asian player. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 28(6), 655–669. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2021.1949382>

- Burdsey, D. (2007). *British Asians and Football: Culture, identity, exclusion*. Routledge.
- Campbell, D., & Davis, L. (2024). Analyzing the British news media's representations of British female Olympians during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. *The International Journal of Sport and Society*, 15(3), 43–67. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2152-7857/CGP/v15i03/43-67>
- Chohan, R. (2024). My heart is broken by France's Olympic hijab ban. *BBC Sport*, 25 July. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/basketball/articles/c4ng5k15pzyo>.
- Cunningham, G. B. (2021). The under-representation of racial minorities in coaching and leadership positions in the United States. In S. Bradbury, J. Lusted, and J. van Sterkenburg (Eds.), *'Race', Ethnicity and racism in sports coaching* (pp. 3–21). Routledge.
- Cunningham, G. B. (2010). Understanding the under-representation of African American coaches: A multilevel perspective. *Sport Management Review*, 13(4), 395–406. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2009.07.006>
- Campbell, P. I., & Maloney, M. (2022). 'White digital footballers can't jump': (Re)constructions of race in FIFA 20. *Soccer & Society*, 23(8), 894–908. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2022.2109805>
- Farrington, N., Kilvington, D., Saeed, A., & Price, J. (2012). *Race, racism and sports journalism*. Routledge.
- Fletcher, T. (2014). 'Does he look like a Paki?' An exploration of 'whiteness', positionality and reflexivity in inter-racial sports research. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 6(2), 244–260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2013.796487>
- FIFA & FIFPRO. (2023). *Social media protection service – FIFA women's world cup Australia & New Zealand 2023: Full tournament analysis*. FIFA Threat Matrix. <https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/36bb7afdd56112ab/original/FIFA-Social-Media-Protection-Service-FIFA-Women-s-World-Cup-2023-tournament-analysis.pdf>.
- Friman, U., Ruotsalainen, M., & Ståhl, M. (2023). Communicating and practicing diversity, equity, and inclusion in Finnish Esports Organizations: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Electronic Gaming and Esports*, 1(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jege.2022-0040>
- Hammond, A., Jeanes, R., Penney, D., & Leahy, D. (2019). 'I feel we are inclusive enough': Examining swimming coaches' understandings of inclusion and disability. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 36(4), 311–321. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2018-0164>
- Kilvington, D. (2021). 'He needs pulling down a peg or two': Assessing online fan responses to racialized discourse in sports broadcasting. *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, 19(1), 25–41. [https://doi.org/10.1386/nl\\_00021\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/nl_00021_1)
- Kilvington, D. (2019). Does English football warrant the Rooney rule? Assessing the thoughts of British Asian coaches. *Sport in Society*, 22(3), 432–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1490269>
- Kilvington, D. (2016). *British Asians, exclusion and the football industry*. Routledge.
- Kilvington, D., Cable, J., Cowell, S., Mottershead, G., & Webster, C. (2022). Investigating online fan responses to the Rooney rule in English football. In J. Sanderson (Ed.), *Sport, social media, and digital technology* (pp. 67–87). Emerald Press.
- Kilvington, D., & Price, J. (2021). The beautiful game in a world of hate: Sports journalism, football and social media abuse. In R. Domeneghetti (Ed.), *Insights on reporting sports in the digital age: Ethical and practical considerations in a changing media landscape* (pp. 104–119). Routledge.
- Kilvington, D., & Price, J. (2019a). "From backstage to frontstage" exploring football and the growing problem of online abuse. In S. Lawrence & G. Crawford (Eds.), *Digital football cultures: Fandom, identities and resistance* (pp. 69–85). Routledge.
- Kilvington, D., & Price, J. (2019b). Tackling social media abuse? Critically assessing English football's response to online racism. *Communication & Sport*, 7(1), 64–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479517745300>
- Lake, R. J. (2019). A history of social exclusion in British tennis: From grass roots to the elite level. In R. J. Lake & C. Osborne (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of tennis: History, culture and politics*. Routledge.
- Longley, K. (2021). The Olympics have long been an arena for the fight between racism and equality. *The Washington Post*, 23 July. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/07/23/olympics-have-long-been-an-arena-fight-between-racism-equality/>.
- Martin, J., & Whalen, L. (2014). Effective practices of coaching disability sport. *European Journal of Adapted Physical Activity*, 7(2), 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.5507/euj.2014.007>
- Norman, L. (2008). The UK coaching system is failing women coaches. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 3(4), 447–476. <https://doi.org/10.1260/174795408787186431>
- Norman, L. (2010). Bearing the burden of doubt: Women coaches' experiences of gender relations. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 81(4), 506–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2010.10599712>
- Norman, L. (2014). A crises of confidence: Women coaches' responses to their engagement in resistance. *Sport, Education and Society*, 19(5), 532–551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2012.689975>
- Norman, L. (2013). The challenges facing women coaches and the contributions they can make to the profession. *International Journal of Coaching Science*, 7(2), 3–23.
- Robertson, S. (2016). Hear their voices: Suggestions for developing and supporting women coaches from around the world. In N. M. LaVoi (Ed.), *Women in sports coaching* (pp. 177–223). Routledge.
- Phipps, C. (2021). Thinking beyond the binary: Barriers to trans\* participation in university sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(1), 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690219889621>

- Phipps, C. (2020). 'We already do enough around equality and diversity': Action taken by student union officers to promote LGBT+ inclusion in university sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 37(4), 310–318. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2019-0119>
- Rankin-Wright, A. J., Hylton, K., & Norman, L. (2016). Off-colour landscape: Framing race equality in sport coaching. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 33(4), 357–368. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2015-0174>
- Ratna, A. (2014). "Who are ya?" The national identities and belongings of British Asian football fans. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 48(3), 286–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2014.927603>
- Sinclair, G., Kearns, C., Liston, K., Kilvington, D., Black, J., Doidge, M., & Lynn, T. (2024). Online abuse, emotion work and sports journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2024.2412213>
- UEFA. (2024). *Tackling online abuse at UEFA EURO 2024: Insights from the entire tournament*. UEFA [online]. <https://www.uefa.com/euro2024/news/028f-1b6d62565cc8-f81d3365b52e-1000-tackling-online-abuse-at-uefa-euro-2024-insights-from-the-en/>
- Van Sterkenburg, J., & Spaaij, R. (2015). Mediated football: Representations and audience receptions of race/ethnicity, gender and nation. *Soccer & Society*, 16(5–6), 593–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2014.963317>

Daniel Kilvington

Leeds Beckett University

 [D.J.Kilvington@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:D.J.Kilvington@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)