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Black Lives Matter in Sport...?

This paper teases out the way that ‘race’ and its consequent tensions in sport resemble the broader tensions where they reside. Though reference to wider international contexts are limited in a paper of this nature, parallels can be drawn through the interpretation and application of Critical Race Theory to understanding sport and society (Hawkins *et al.*, 2017, Hylton, 2018, Dagkas *et al.*, 2019a). As I write this paper, I am reminded of a quote by US African American tennis star Arthur Ashe shaking hands at the net with Jimmy Connors after winning Wimbledon in 1975. He remarks in his autobiography that, *I am almost always aware of race, alert to its power as an idea, sensitive to its nuances in the world* (Ashe, 1993: 138). Ashe was a successful sportsman being the first Black man to win Wimbledon and later captain of the US Davis Cup team. Even while dying from a botched blood transfusion that caused him to contract HIV, he remained adamant that racism was his *biggest burden*. Serena Williams was not privy to Ashe’s experiences in the 1970s because she was born in 1981, yet her own remarks are consistent with his decades later. Williams argues that ‘race’ affects how she is viewed by tennis fans,

I feel like people think I’m mean,” she said. “Really tough and really mean and really street. I believe that the other girls in the locker room will say, ‘Serena’s really nice.’ But Maria Sharapova, who might not talk to anybody, might be perceived by the public as nicer. Why is that? Because I’m black and so I look mean? That’s the society we live in. That’s life.
(Guardian Sport, 2017)

Williams’s use of *That’s life* is an acceptance that racism is part of her lived reality. Serena Williams won her first grand slam in 1999, five years before super star African American, Coco Gauff was born (D.O.B. 2004). In June 2020, 16 year old Coco Gauff addressed a Black Lives Matter protest where she stated, *If you are choosing silence, you are choosing the side of the oppressor* (BBC Sport, 2020). A privilege of Whiteness is to stay silent and remain relatively unaffected by such egregious behaviours. A general consequence of not acknowledging Whiteness is the tacit aversion to supporting antiracist initiatives, dismantling racist practices and therefore weakening the potential for social change (Sullivan, 2006, Leonardo, 2009). This continuity of experiences of racism for men and women tennis players is indicative of Black lives in other sports and other domains of society. Ashe, Williams and

Gauff are conscious of the power of racism within and without tennis. What will be shocking for some reading this paper is that for them, sport is a utopian, race-neutral, meritocratic space. In sport, people are often viewed as being on a level playing field with an equal opportunity to succeed. Such myths are problematised here. Beyond mainstream sport scholarship, there are a number of scholars who see sport in a less rose-tinted, more detached and critical way. The scholars draw on transdisciplinary critical race scholarship that recognises the significance of ‘race’ and racism in society, arguing for activist scholarship, and social justice. I am one of them.

Antiracism isn’t always good

As the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown begins to ease in England, the most popular global football league, the English Premier League, is planning to resume its rescheduled season. During this time, the international awareness of racism and Black Lives Matter has permeated the politics of British sport to the point that all key stakeholders from global to local agree that they must make a stand for racial justice¹. These stands are being made without irony and contrition for the inertia and myopic responses to previous controversies related to racism (BBC Sport, 2011a, FIFA.COM, 2013a, BBC Sport, 2017). Their engagement with antiracism has many people hopeful, yet for others like me their reactive, ahistorical politics leaves little potential to combat their own institutional racism. All three governing bodies over the last few years have had to counter their own self-made controversies concerning poor leadership and commitment to challenging racism. I emphasise in this paper that such contradictions are not limited to this one sport.

Never-the-less, racism in football has a long track record so it was a milestone in May 2013 to see the Federation Internationale de Football Associations (FIFA) establish a Task Force Against Racism and Discrimination, *as part of a series of measures to tackle the pressing issue of racism and discrimination in football* (FIFA.COM, 2013b). Over this period, FIFA’s President, Joseph (Sepp) Blatter, had led them through a series of difficult and controversial issues in regard to individual, cultural and institutionally racist (and Islamophobic) events across the world; in some of these cases he was at the centre of them. The FIFA Task Force was established in March 2013 following a personal initiative by Sepp Blatter, who only a

¹ From top to bottom in football (soccer) which includes the international governing body for football, (FIFA), regional governing bodies (in Europe it is UEFA), and national governing bodies (in England the FA). The English premier League is the top tier of English professional football.

short period beforehand had argued that there was no racism in football and suggested that a handshake would resolve the issue at the end of the game (BBC Sport, 2011b). The Taskforce had its first meeting in May 2013 and the taskforce was terminated in September 2016. In three years, its business seemingly done.

The issues of race and racism have also become the focus of high-profile sports people in the UK. Manchester City striker, Raheem Sterling, has made his antiracism voice heard in his resistance to the abuse of Black players in the stands, on the pitch and in biased media representations compared to their White counterparts (Joseph, 2019). His claims of racism in the recruitment of Black coaches and managers has been an ongoing criticism of football in the UK by policymakers, practitioners and academics (Bradbury *et al.*, 2015, Hawkins *et al.*, 2017) and according to Sporting Equals (2016) about governing bodies more generally. Hence, in 2020 the English Premier League's approach to all of its teams replacing the names of players on shirts with *Black Lives Matter*, while endorsing them taking a knee at the start of games can be viewed optimistically as a new awakening. Organisations cannot afford to take their institutional eyes off racism because it has a habit of morphing in ways to make it harder to identify and challenge in the frontstage and the backstage (Hughey, 2011, Hylton and Lawrence, 2016). Institutional approaches to racism require proactive, long-term strategies that are working even when no one is looking. Antiracism cannot be reduced to PR exercises or face-saving projects. Antiracism cannot take a break because racism never has a day off.

Critical Race Theory Matters in Sport

In 2018 I wrote that a) sport is a contested site, b) sport is a microcosm of society c) 'race' and racism are central to our understanding of sport. I also overlay this critique with a recognition of the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of racisms. While we mourn the deaths of Black lives today our attention can also become distracted by narrow manifestations of racism (overt). Such approaches leave our efforts focused on individual behaviours to the detriment of challenging systemic policies, practices and dispositions that entrench everyday racism. The colour coded racism of past decades is still with us but in addition to this our critiques and activism require continued surveillance of cultural, institutional and structural arrangements that remain nebulous, complex and difficult to challenge.

In using a critical lens on *sport as leisure* it is important to contextualise it as an everyday past-time. When *at leisure* Black people are as vulnerable to racism in society (structural) as they are in the workplace, education or other institutions. Their everyday racism has been described as subtle and stunning, often ambiguous, by those drawing on ideas of racial microaggressions whether it is related to racist banter (Burdsey, 2011), online interactions (Farrington *et al.*, 2015) or broader microinsults, microassaults and microinvalidations (Sue, 2010, Hylton, 2015). Sport in most countries is an important cultural product. Most of us engage or participate in sport in our spare time, time free from obligation, discretionary time, but it is inextricably linked to who we are, what we do and how we do it. In that regard, i) sport is not an island in isolation from our lived experiences, ii) 'race' remains significant in society and iii) racism is pernicious and haemorrhages into sporting contexts. These elements of our society coalesce and can be drawn out in a critical reading of any sport. This was clear in the example of the 1968 Black Power salute by John Carlos and Tommie Smith which was as vilified as Colin Kaepernick's acts of kneeling at the US national anthem at the start of National Football League games to raise awareness of the 'poor treatment of racial minorities' [sic]. Kaepernick began his protests four years before the killing of George Floyd and almost 50 years after Smith and Carlos (Krasovic, 2016). We can safely argue that Kaepernick, as with Carlos and Smith, did not suddenly become alive to the fact of structural and institutional racism. Though, it seems post-George Floyd's death that many stakeholders in sport are now only just beginning to recognise these concerns, their White privilege, and their own places within racial power processes. For example, the National Football League, that did so much to discredit Kaepernick and colleagues' protests in 2016, only apologising in the heat of Black Lives Matter protests for their deleterious standpoint in 2020 (Times Editorial Board, 2020).

Black Lives Matter politics is so important because it raises the spectre of insidious racialised processes at all levels of society that aggregate to disadvantage and alter individual and social-group opportunities and experiences. This can be emphasised by taking one of the seemingly most benign of sports to illustrate how race can affect attitudes and behaviours in different settings. I illustrate this with a turn to cycling because behaviours in cycling, as with other forms of recreation, mirror broader structural and institutional relations elsewhere, and dependent on each sport there are particular and different outcomes. In cycling, as with other sports, *it does this when micro level (individual) experiences mesh with cultural and institutional racial bias and racism*. In many countries such as the Netherlands, France, or

Italy, where cycling and cycling infrastructures are commonplace, ‘race’ and racial dynamics will take on their own particular manifestations. We see race at play in sport and wider society in regard to these nations (see for instance Lloyd, 1998, van Sterkenburg *et al.*, 2005, Bradbury *et al.*, 2015). However, I draw mainly from the extant literature on ethnicity and cycling which focuses in the main on the UK and North America to draw out the tensions of ‘race’ on the seemingly level playing field of cycling. For instance, I argue that in Chicago,

In a city where cycling patterns are overlaid with police citations the bulk of infractions occur in the least popular cycling spaces. Though statistics can only reveal part of a story the disproportionality of these statistics raise serious concerns. These spaces are racialised as Black and the unequal share of the citations are issued to African Americans (Hylton, 2018: 117).

In the UK, the challenges of racism for Black cyclists became patently clear for Huugo Boateng on a charity cycle ride with his son and a number of others in north London. Boateng’s son was pushed into a bush and threatened with a taser gun by a police officer looking for someone who ‘fit his description’ (Iqbal, 2020). For others like ‘Manny’ (founder of the Black Cyclist Network [BCN], London) he set up the BCN to make Black people feel more comfortable in cycling because he struggled to see anyone who looked like him on a bike. For me, a focus on cycling emerged partly from my recognition of the dearth of literature on ‘race’ and the outdoors and also from my own experiences of cycling in the suburbs and local countryside of Yorkshire in northern England (Hylton, 2017b). As a Black man in the north of England my Blackness felt more significant in the context of cycling, than a more cosmopolitan sport like football, due to the *unbearable whiteness of cycling* that I shared in the *Conversation* journal (Hylton, 2017b); and more specifically the British cycling community in its most popular magazine, the *Cycling Weekly* (Hylton, 2017a). As with Manny’s experience, my everyday use of what Du Bois called ‘double consciousness’ and a feeling of being like Puwar’s (2004) *Space Invaders*, a body out of place, is regularly felt when I cycle with a group of Black British men and a group of White cyclists. I am conspicuous as an individual in one group and I am conspicuous of being part of a whole group in the other. I navigate whiteness as an individual in one and as part of a group in the other. In one, race is a polite discussion while in the other it speaks to everyday racisms and shared experiences. My experience of cycling in the UK has parallels with that reported in

Chicago, and London, but our lived experience of racism is what unites our stories of Blackness and more gritty engagement with sport and leisure than our White.

When Travis and Greg McMichael followed and killed African American, Ahmaud Arboury, on his jog in Brunswick Georgia on February 23rd 2020 his killing became another reminder of the red flags that I waved in 2018 when I published *Contesting Race and Sport: Shaming the Colour Line* (Hylton, 2018). Comparisons to everyday racialised participation in cycling can be found in other leisure time recreation such as a daily run (Ahmaud Arboury), playing in a playground (Tamir Rice) or getting sweets in a break from a basketball game on TV (Trayvon Martin). Like George Floyd, Arboury's horrifyingly public murder, caught on video, became another one of a number of violent assaults perpetrated on Black people engaged in sport and recreation.

Institutional Racism

21 years ago, in the UK the term institutional racism was coined to describe the systemic practices by the police that racially discriminated against Black people. Key words emerging from the Inquiry's definition of institutional racism included *collective failure; [in]appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin; detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour; amount to discrimination; disadvantage minority ethnic people* (Macpherson, 1999: 6.34). Other critics have made similar observations about institutional racism in relation to a swathe of racialised issues that continue to undermine social justice and equality in sport (Hylton, 2018, Dagkas *et al.*, 2019b, Sport England, 2020).

The MacPherson Inquiry was the investigation of the murder of teenager Stephen Lawrence, left to die in a stairwell by five young White men (Macpherson, 1999). Stephen Lawrence's murder became a syren call for Black activism and rights in the UK, as did George Floyd in 2020. However, 21 years after the MacPherson Inquiry, Stephen Lawrence's father is adamant that *people of colour [a]re still being treated as second class citizens* (Dodd, 2020). At Stephen Lawrence's trial it was revealed that he had been socialising with his friend, talking about football when he was murdered in 1993. Stephen Lawrence was killed in an unprovoked racist attack that was only fully prosecuted after the family was granted a public inquiry into the (mis)handling of the case by the police and the judiciary. In the MacPherson

Inquiry Dr Robin Oakley at the Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies at the University of London presented evidence that reconciled the seamless connection between institutional and structural racism,

It could be said that institutional racism in this sense is in fact pervasive throughout the culture and institutions of the whole of British society and is in no way specific to the police service. However, because of the nature of the police role, its impact on society if not addressed in the police organisation may be particularly severe. In the police service, despite the extensive activity designed to address racial and ethnic issues in recent years, the concept of 'institutional racism' has not received the attention it deserves. (Macpherson, 1999: 6.33)

My concerns with cycling in the north of England are exponentially exaggerated elsewhere. For instance, over 40 years before Ahmaud Arboury's murder, Bloom (2017) found that the racial pattern of the policing of city boundaries due to the enhanced mobility of ethnic populations is an aspect of cycling that he argues has been present since the late nineteenth century though there is a paucity of research on this topic. Bloom (2017) revealed in one case in Washington that African American, Gregory Coleman, was shot in a sting operation for taking a bike he thought was his own stolen one in 1972. A policeman stated that the gun fell out of his holster and shot Coleman by accident. Due to stop and search regulations, racial profiling remained a staple of policing in Washington leading to the racially biased citation and incarceration of Black cyclists like Coleman, and Boateng with his son in London.

We do not know how many times this type of misunderstanding has led to grievous consequences. However, the phenomenon of ever-present camera phones has made it more of a lottery for racists to break the law and racial profiling to go unchallenged. What we do know is fragmented, though even with this limited knowledge, very clear patterns of racism and the significance of 'race' loom ominously large. Nearly four years before George Floyd's death, On July 7th, 2016 the Governor of Minnesota, the state in which Floyd was murdered, admitted that had Philando Castile been White he would not have been shot by the police on a regular traffic stop. Like George Floyd, Castile's shooting was captured on the police dashcam and by his own partner in the passenger seat. The policeman was acquitted. In 2016 the Governor, Mark Dayton stated that,

I'm forced to confront, and I think all of us in Minnesota are forced to confront, that this kind of racism exists and that it's incumbent upon all of us to vow that we're going to do whatever we can to see that it doesn't happen, doesn't continue to happen. (Lopez, 2020)

But racism continues unabated, so what can we learn from that? The nature of systemic racism is that it requires no active part to be perpetuated and maintained. For example, in the case of the UK Government's claims that the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games would reduce racial disparities and improve diversity in sport, I argued that such discourses cannot make such assumptions without dealing directly with the historical and institutional racial disparities and racism in sport (Hylton and Morpeth, 2012). Single solution or colour-blind policies could never be the answer to entrenched racial inequalities in sport. Where racism is structural and institutional in the police or any other public service it will continue to reproduce the same inequalities. In the case of historical divisions in the provision of swimming in the US, Black children are half as likely to know how to swim as White Children and three times more likely to drown. This is partially blamed on the widespread discrimination that limited access to pools and lessons during the 20th century (Wiltse, 2014). Even post-segregation, residential location made access to better pools more problematic for Black communities. Even swimming can help us to chart the racial politics and the construction of race (Caleb Smith, 2012).

Further, Sport England has recognised that amongst other sports, swimming is severely divided along racial lines. Their explanation is considered, in terms of recognising a number of factors in the ecosystem of sport which include geography and the physical environment, socioeconomics, gender, ethnicity, institutional/organisational cultures, yet racism and discrimination are recognised as wider more pervasive issue that continue to permeate sport (Sport England, 2020). We can agree that, due to the nature of society, race and its intersections are significant in whether our experiences of an everyday cycle, jog, game of tennis, swim, play in the park or even drive to buy cigarettes on a public holiday can be fun, traumatic or absolutely catastrophic. In this regard racism in sport and society more generally can be perceived as more pedestrian than spectacular (Holland, 2012). In this moment as we take time to exhale it is imperative to state that Black Lives Matter in sport.

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