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## “Of Course You’re More Than An Athlete; Now Throw The Damn Ball!”: How Modern Day Athletes Mirror Postbellum Sharecroppers

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“Of Course You’re More Than An Athlete; Now Throw The Damn Ball!”: How Modern Day  
Athletes Mirror Postbellum Sharecroppers

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Historical Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## Introduction

With the enactment of President Abraham Lincoln's famed executive order, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Civil War reaching its conclusion in 1865, all facets of American society were set to change; postbellum reconstruction, for millions of formerly enslaved African Americans, purportedly offered them an opportunity to act as free United States citizens and be respected as such. President Lincoln - one paragraph into the Emancipation Proclamation - states that "all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom."<sup>1</sup>; to these burgeoning novel societal actors, a promise at true, actual freedom was almost all they possessed. Alongside the prospect of a free and fair existence within the country, most freedmen - the term used to describe newly emancipated slaves - also possessed their knowledge and abilities as laborers. Albeit many freedmen also sought out various other opportunities in fields such as

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<sup>1</sup> United States. President (1861-1865 : Lincoln). The Emancipation Proclamation

carpentry, seamstressing, education, or business, the most immediate and logical option was land ownership; these individuals, in fact, had built up the land, nurtured it, fought for it, died for it, and now they had the chance to build a new life off of it. The Freedmen's Bureau, a government agency whose mission was to aid the over four million newly emancipated slaves during their transition from bondage into freedom, assisted heavily with the advocacy of issues that centered around African American's gaining land to live on.<sup>2</sup> The Southern Homestead Act of 1866 also seemingly bolstered the prospect of true African American freedom and opportunity; it guaranteed freedmen the opportunity to work on or purchase government-owned lands in the southern states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi.<sup>3</sup> Freedmen now had the option to not only have land to live on, but they could call themselves owners - free to do whatever they pleased with on the land they paid for and deserved. It truly seemed as if strides were being made towards the advancement of African- Americans; however, the chance at "actual"<sup>4</sup> freedom and opportunity would not last long. The promise of actual freedom and opportunity began to crumble when the Freedmen's Bureau began to; Abraham Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson, was a staunch supporter of the south and believed that the bureau was expensive and exclusionary in nature.<sup>5</sup> After years of presidential vetoes and political

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<sup>2</sup> "Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866." U.S. Senate: Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, Richard. "African Americans and the Southern Homestead Act.

<sup>4</sup> "Actual" freedom was a promise given in the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln; however, that "actual" freedom wouldn't be seen by any freedmen. Even today, it could be highly argued on whether or not "actual" freedom exists

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Senate: Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866., Elizabeth R. Varon and University of Virginia. 2017. "Andrew Johnson: Impact and Legacy."

maneuvering, the program was left underfunded, understaffed, and it eventually was disbanded.<sup>6</sup> In turn, this led to a lot of the lands secured by the bureau, which was being given to former slaves, being taken back and returned to their former white landowners. Along with this, the Homestead Act of 1866 turned out to be just another empty promise; aside from the issue that most recently emancipated slaves did not have the resources to migrate to these designated areas, the land itself was also difficult to work within the context of farming or easy assimilation into a new life.<sup>7</sup> The swamplands and heavily forested areas presented many obstacles to freedmen; on top of this, many of those who could make it to the designated areas were met with businesses and farms operated by racist, white Americans looking to regain their power over them socially, mentally, and physically.<sup>8</sup> All in all, the postbellum effort to effectively and legally support newly emancipated slaves had fallen through; the same men who created the original system of oppression were now in charge of the rebuild - the only difference being that they had to find different ways to retain their power and control. They did this through the establishment of black codes - southern, locally established laws centered around the sole purpose of hindering the lives of black people. These laws meant disparities in government, schooling, voter right, and employment; harsh vagrancy laws even punished those freedmen who simply had no place

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, Richard. "African Americans and the Southern Homestead Act.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

to go.<sup>9</sup> This is where the freedmen's knowledgeability and ability to work the land came back into play; working the land was the only place mainstream white society could accept the African American. The push by African Americans to truly gain a piece of true freedom and the desire of racist whites to keep African Americans in their subservient place would finally clash heads when the institution known as sharecropping gained popularity around the 1870s.<sup>10</sup> Sharecropping is a form of agriculture in which a landowner allows a tenant to use the land in return for a share of the crops produced on the land.<sup>11</sup> In theory, it is a system that should work for both parties; the landlord simply reaps the reward while the sharecropper gains a place to live and a stable source of income. However, it was the nature between the sharecropper and the landlord that made these relationships resemble predation instead of symbiosis. In an article by Donald L. Winters, entitled *Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture: The Economics of Sharecropping in Tennessee*, Winters speaks on which aspect is most important when analyzing sharecropping; when speaking on the sharecropper- landlord relationship, he says “ Scholars advancing this interpretation, while acknowledging the existence of white croppers, assert that the sharecropping system was designed primarily to mobilize the labor of freedmen and to keep blacks dependent upon and subordinate to white planters. They depict it more as a

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<sup>9</sup> “Southern Black Codes.” n.d. Constitutional Rights Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> “Sharecropping.” History.com. ; The rise of sharecropping around 1870 is heavily attributed to the disbandment of the Freedmen's Bureau, the political climate that was against the freedman cause, the failure of the Homestead Act , and the subsequent lack of other viable options.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*



system of racial control than of agricultural production.”<sup>12</sup> This is proven as true by the countless anecdotes from former sharecroppers describing the contracts they unwittingly signed, the struggles they faced working for their landlords, the struggles they faced when trying to work for multiple landowners, the punishments they faced for trying to do more than work, and the peonage they faced if they attempted to leave the situation and better themselves. Sharecropping - what was thought of as a way for newly emancipated slaves to gain housing, gain income, possibly gain land, and gain opportunity - was actually just an institution fueled by an updated version of the same oppression that African Americans had been struggling with for centuries. Truly, sharecropping was a cultural phenomenon that perfectly illustrated what an institution that is grounded in censorship, control, bias, and punishment looked like- especially for those who were deemed as being lower. Sharecropping would eventually become an agricultural practice of the past as the mechanization of the industry was excelling rapidly. The overt hate that fueled the nature of sharecropping would also see a massive decline over the years with the advent of various civil rights movements, legal breakthroughs centered on equality, and the changing cultural tide within the nation; however, regardless of these great cultural and societal advancements, the same ideals and practices that could be seen in the case of postbellum sharecroppers can also still be seen in one of today’s most prevalent and

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<sup>12</sup> Winters, Donald L. "Postbellum Reorganization of Southern Agriculture: The Economics of Sharecropping in Tennessee." *Agricultural History* 62, no. 4 (1988)

influential institutions- sports. Much like a sharecropper, the modern athlete also exists in an institution that values them only for their bodies or what they can do with them; they exist in a system where they work under contract for powerful people who only value them for the profit they generate- not who they actually are and what they believe in. There are many instances within the history of sports where athletes choose to stand up, speak out on issues that go beyond sports, and, in turn, they are lambasted, shamed, judged, fired, or even blackballed from their respective sport. These athletes are often people of color who come from nothing, and even if they aren't a person of color, they've worked their entire lives to reach the platforms that they do. These individuals have given everything to get to where they are, and then they choose to give back to us - the entertainment, the transcendent moments, the unforgettable memories. Athletes, like sharecroppers, simply want to work hard, advance to higher heights in life, and truly be free; however, when that freedom includes using their platform to shine a light on issues that could possibly be seen as a danger to the profitability or "sanctity" of the sport, entire careers are often seen being placed in jeopardy. Using an institution to silence or control a group of people for one's own gain or interests is wrong; it was wrong in the case of sharecropping and it is wrong in the case of sports as well. Albeit one institution is based in the agricultural field and the other is based in the entertainment field, the fact that both institutions mirror each other cannot be denied. By looking at the connection between the two, and then analyzing

specific examples that illustrate how they are connected, it will show that modern-day athletes can be seen as “today’s sharecroppers”, who work for higher wages and world-renown but are still given the same personal respect, professional respect, and job security of an actual postbellum sharecropper.

## Ch.1 - Sharecropping, Sports, and Their Relationship

“Anything you wanted, you could git if you were a good hand. You could git anything you wanted as long as you worked. If you didn’t make no money, that’s all right; they would advance you more. But you better not leave him, you better not try to leave and get caught. They’d keep you in debt. They were sharp. Christmas come, you could take up twenty dollar, in somethin’ to eat and much as you wanted in whiskey. You could buy a gallon of whiskey. Anything that kept you a slave because he was always right and you were always wrong if there was difference. If there was an argument, he would get mad and there would be a shooting take place.”<sup>13</sup> This quote is from the 1938 interview of Henry Blake, a former slave and sharecropper. When beginning to analyze the relationship between sharecroppers and athletes, I believe that Mr. Blake’s statement is very important. In fact, his statement actually encapsulates the reasoning behind why athletes mirror postbellum

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<sup>13</sup> “‘When We Worked on Shares, We Couldn’t Make Nothing’: Henry Blake Talks About Sharecropping after the Civil War.” n.d. HISTORY MATTERS

sharecroppers; however, before I explain as to why that is, the foundation for why professional athletes can be considered postbellum sharecroppers must be established. As stated before when speaking on the system of sharecropping, a sharecropper is a tenant farmer – someone who works land that's rented from its owner. Typically, a sharecropper will pay the landowner with part of the harvest, rather than money. Based on this definition alone, the analogous relationship between sharecropping and sports can be perceived. A sharecropper is someone who uses their physical and mental labor, in the service of others, to gain resources for themselves and their landlords. A professional athlete is someone who uses their physical and mental labor, in the service of others, to provide entertainment – while also having to gain resources for themselves and their executives. At their core, both of these relationships give the impression of being mutually symbiotic in nature; however, this is clearly not the case – if it were, this essay would surely be superfluous. In actuality, both relationships – under the guise of mutualism – have many caveats that cause the nature of the relationship to become skewed in favor of one party; of course, this benefit shifts to the entity with the most power or influence. In the case of sharecropping, this power skewed heavily towards the white landowners; as landlords, they had the ability to manipulate their often naive tenants, ensnare them in inordinately partisan contracts, and punish their supposedly free laborers if they became unproductively boisterous or empowered. In the case of professional athletes, this power shifts towards

the owners of these organizations; as owners, they have a say in contract negotiations, trade deals, pushes for publicity, allocation of funds , and - depending on the situation- termination. However, the biggest caveat that exists within both practices is the practice of public reproof. Whenever a sharecropper breached their contract, they were punished. They weren't punished like workers who were committing contract infringement; they weren't subpoenaed or tried in any courtrooms. They were threatened, hunted, captured, and publicly beaten like the slaves their "landlords" intended for them to be. In the sports world, this same phenomena can be seen; when an athlete breaks the mold, steps outside of their intended purpose, or go beyond what they're believed to be capable of, they too can be punished. While the punishment isn't being flogged, and it can happen in private settings as well as the public, the fact that it still exists for an athlete who is trying to be more than themselves or their organization is prevalent. There are countless situations where athletes are either fired, blackballed, or forced into compromising situations due to their attempts at endeavoring on journeys that transcend simply playing the game. Aside from illustrating exactly why professional athletes mirror postbellum sharecroppers, this analysis also illustrates why Henry Blake's quote exemplifies the comparison between the two. A person could have whatever they wanted -no matter the situation or the cost- as long as they did their job; however, if said person were to challenge the powers that be or attempt to outgrow their position, there would be serious

consequences. Mr. Blake's quote, as well as the next few examples, just go to show how similar these two systems actually are.

## Ch. 2 - NFL

For over one hundred years, the National Football League has been a cornerstone in American entertainment. For the sport of football, it represents the pinnacle of athleticism, training, and dedication; even those who possess all of the necessary traits can fail in the NFL. Ryan Leaf, Jemarcus Russell, and Brian "The Boz" Bosworth all come to mind when discussing such players; however, for those men who have maintained their longevity within the league, there is only fame, reverence, and immortality via the Canton, Ohio - home of the NFL Hall of Fame. Names like Walter Payton, Joe Montana, and Lawrence Taylor come to mind on this list; men like these are the ones who pioneered the game whether it have been through their play, through their character, through their antics, or through their powerful actions off of the field. The Walter and Connie Payton Foundation has been advocating and providing for the homeless population within the city of Illinois since 1988; the NFL still honors Walter for his play and charitable acts by annually giving out the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award.<sup>14</sup> The J.J Watt Foundation helped raise over 40 million dollars for the city of Houston in the wake of Hurricane

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<sup>14</sup> "Walter Payton Man of the Year Winners." n.d. Pro.

Harvey; he received numerous awards and commendations for his efforts including the NFL Walter Payton Man of the Year Award.<sup>15</sup> Even Calais Campbell, an NFL newcomer, has been lauded for outstanding charitable efforts in Florida centering around youth and education; he is the current NFL Walter Payton Man of the Year.<sup>16</sup> All of these men, for their actions off the field, have been recognized and praised by many; however, the most important constants here are these players' ability to help other people, still actively thrive within the league while doing so, and still receive the full support of the National Football League. The NFL publicly prides itself on supporting many issues that are important to the players, the fans, and the communities that they occupy; however, there have been issues that have not been supported although they directly affect the player, the fans, and the communities that they occupy. The lack of support on these issues often culminates into players being silenced, fined, fired, or even blackballed from the league altogether. Perhaps the most timely and socially relevant example of this is the situation involving Colin Kaepernick; however, before speaking on the situation, it is also imperative to understand the type of player Colin Kaepernick was. He was drafted in the 2011 NFL Draft in Round 2, and he was chosen with the 36th pick; any fan of football will tell you that those numbers aren't so great. They'll also tell you that you can accomplish anything as long as one possesses a great work ethic, the will, and the passion to do so; Colin possessed them all. Within

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

two years of joining the league, Kaepernick would help guide his team, the San Francisco 49ers, to the Super Bowl. Albeit them losing the big game, the promise shown by their young, elite, and hungry new quarterback was undeniable. Quarterback disputes involving management would slightly offset his meteoric rise over the next few years; however, he would soon ascend to heights of international notoriety rarely had by NFL players - just not for the reasons he'd hoped. It all started during a National Football League pre-season game on August 26, 2016; a member of the Niners Nation had noticed San Francisco 49ers then back-up quarterback Colin Kaepernick sitting while others stood for the United States' national anthem - they snapped a picture.<sup>17</sup> The image soon drew a lot of media attention; when asked about his reason for sitting, he said it was in response to "the oppression of people of color and [the] ongoing issues with police brutality."<sup>18</sup> As the weeks went on, amidst the instant controversy after the first photo was posted, he would continue his protest; however, he would opt to kneel instead of sit. This was due to the fact that the meaning of his sitting was often bungled by the media thus causing confusion within the public sphere; Kaepernick, on the switch from sitting to kneeling, said "We were talking to (Boyer) about how we can get the message back on track and not take away from the military, not take away from pride in our country but keep the focus where the issues really are. As we talked about it, we came up with taking a knee because there are issues that still need to be

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<sup>17</sup> Lockhart, P.R. 2018. "Colin Kaepernick's Collusion Grievance against the NFL, Explained." Vox., Coombs, Danielle & Lambert, Cheryl Ann & Cassilo, David & Humphries, Zachary. (2019). Flag on the Play: Colin Kaepernick and the Protest Paradigm.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*



addressed and there was also a way to show more respect for the men and women that fight for this country.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, he was trying to clarify what his statement was to everyone- to the media, to the public, and to the league. These responses for his actions, in every sense of the word, are perfect - or they should be. Here we have an NFL rising star speaking out against an issue that is extremely prevalent and unfathomably polarizing within the American societal system; while bringing awareness to such an issue, he’s also bringing massive amounts of attention to the NFL, showing the world that NFL players aren’t just machines built for our entertainment, and that there are issues bigger than the game itself. Even in the face of misrepresentation and heavy criticism, he remained calm, went to seek guidance, eloquently explained himself to the masses, and stood firm in his actions. The NFL has had players do these exact same things in the name of other issues, and those men are hailed as heroes and “champions for the future”; why wasn’t Kap hailed as a hero? The optics and timing of the protest are two reasons; refusing to stand for the anthem, in any fashion, was perceived by many Americans as unpatriotic; even the President of the United States sent out numerous tweets admonishing those who chose to protest. This created a counter- productive discourse on issues that weren’t even related to the protest’s actual purpose, and even when Kaepernick continued to explain what his movement meant, nobody was willing to stop talking about what they had already believed it to

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

be. The protest eventually caused so much controversy that it brought the NFL to an impasse; they could either support their superstar through the controversy or they could cut ties with an athlete who had begun to outgrow the game. Instead of backing their player and supporting his truly important and ever-relevant protest, the owners chose to cast out the player who chose to open his mouth. They chose to punish the athlete who worked hard to reach the pinnacle of his sport, and with that position, chose to bring awareness to an issue that was bigger than the next touchdown or the next playoff run. The differentiation between Colin's stand and other NFL social justice advocates would be seen even clearer as, due to the effects his protest put on the National Football League, he would be essentially blackballed by league officials, teams, and owners. In 2017, when he became a free agent, he was pretty much overlooked altogether; albeit free agency doesn't guarantee a player a spot on a team, there were no fathomable reasons as to why a quarterback of Kaepernick's stature was left unsigned.<sup>20</sup> After weeks of watching bottom-tier talent be signed before him, he opted to sue the NFL for collusion; the basis for his argument was that league owners were plotting together in order to make sure he never played another NFL game in his life. Albeit winning an undisclosed settlement in his case, Colin has still yet to be signed, or even brought in for a try out, by an NFL team since. Colin Kaepernick was a hard worker, a dedicated player, and a promising NFL talent that was expected to

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<sup>20</sup> Martenzie. 2019. "All the Quarterbacks Who Signed since Colin Kaepernick Became a Free Agent." The Undefeated.

enjoy a fruitful career within the sport; however, once he added another title to his resume - community activist- everything fell apart faster than it had started. Was it the confusion of the media and the people that caused such an uproarious response? Was it the misrepresentation of his message that caused his subsequent demise? Have the owners labeled him as an outcast because he kneeled for African American rights or because he took a stance in general? These are some of the questions that have been debated over these past three years and definitive answers are still scarce; however, what is definitive is that once Colin Kaepernick stepped outside of his role as an athlete and chose to stand - or kneel- for something bigger than himself, he was punished. He was berated. He was made hated. He was forced out of the sport he loved just because he chose to speak on an issue that was bigger than him. One must ask themselves this- If a postbellum sharecropper went to his landlord and brought up an issue bigger than himself or work - especially something community based- would his fate not also include punishment and personal detriment? While the means of punishment definitely differ between postbellum sharecropping and professional athletics, the ends -to punish, to hurt, to put down, to put one back in line- remain the same and that is an alarming phenomenon.

## Ch. 3- NCAA

Another staple in American entertainment is collegiate athletics. Every year, millions of fans watch on as athletes from various sports around the country compete for titles, status, fame, and a shot at the next level. Atop the pinnacle of college sports within America sits the NCAA; the NCAA is a nonprofit organization that regulates student athletes from 1,268 North American institutions and conferences.<sup>21</sup> With three major divisions, and many other smaller ones that actively compete under the NCAA umbrella, they annually support over 480,000 student athletes participating in competition<sup>22</sup>; they are also regarded as the premier rulemaking, enforcing, and sanctioning body within collegiate athletics. However, with all of their power and oversight, the NCAA is still mentioned by many in a very unflattering light. This is due to the fact that the NCAA effectively does nothing to benefit it's athletes besides giving them a platform; in fact, there have been many examples where the NCAA's involvement has been more detrimental to an athletes life, successful matriculation, legacy, career, family, and much more when compared to any other factor. This all stems from rule that the NCAA fervently protects despite the disparages it can cause within the association—the Amateurism rule. This rule effectively ensures that each NCAA regulated athlete must compete as an amateur; under the guidelines of this rule, NCAA

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<sup>21</sup>Andrews, Tyler J., "Fair Play: An Ethical Evaluation of the NCAA's Treatment of Student Athletes" (2013)

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

athletes can risk their eligibility if they are found to be “ taking a break between high school/secondary school and full-time collegiate enrollment and continuing to participate in your [NCAA] sport(s), using a recruiting agency, scholarship agent or a scouting service, receiving payment from a sports team to participate, receiving funds or money to offset training expenses, accepting prize money based on performance/finish at a competition, being represented or marketed by a professional sports agent, or promoting or endorsing a commercial product or service.”<sup>23</sup> To summarize what this list means to most collegiate athletes and their families, it means that athletes cannot receive virtually any benefits from the work they do. They aren’t compensated for the intense training sessions, injuries, and comebacks. They aren’t compensated for being on the road and missing countless weddings, funerals, and birthdays. They aren’t compensated for the missed college experiences or missed family times. They simply aren’t compensated, and considering the fact that these young athletes risk everything for themselves, their families, and for the fans at home – exactly like paid professional athletes do – their inability to seek out or even create their own streams of revenue is disgusting. Unfortunately, the troubling nature of the situation is only made worse when accompanied with the fact that the NCAA is one of the most lucrative organizations in America – its wealth built on the backs of the athletes they refuse to compensate. In *Indentured: The Inside Story of the Rebellion Against the NCAA*, Joe Nocera and Ben Strauss also speak on how the NCAA, through their hypocritical rules and

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<sup>23</sup>“Amateurism.” NCAA.org

practices, effectively treat their athletes like sharecroppers or indentured servants. In their book, they say “with the NCAA now generating over \$900 million in annual revenue; with athletic conferences owning their own lucrative all-sports cable networks; with coaches making \$5 million (Jim Harbaugh, Michigan football) or \$7 million (Nick Saban, Alabama football) or even \$10 million (Mike Krzyzewski, Duke basketball); and with ESPN paying \$7.3 billion over twelve years for the rights to the new college football playoff, the idea that the players who make all this possible should not get much more than a scholarship isn’t just hypocritical. It’s offensive. An economist named Dan Rascher, who is a character in this book, estimates that college sports in its totality generates some \$13 billion, which, incredibly, is more than the most lucrative professional sports league in America, the National Football League.”

<sup>24</sup> In recent years, the numbers in favor of the NCAA’s revenue stream have only increased; however, what hasn’t changed is the mistreatment of athletes within the NCAA - this remains a long-standing constant. When analyzing the link between sharecropping and sports, the NCAA is essentially in a league of its own; this is because the connection between the two is much more visible when compared to other sports. This is due to the situation of the athletes who are participating in the sharecropper - landlord engagement. Much like newly freed African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War and emancipation, some of these athletes are in confusing, dangerous, or seemingly hopeless

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<sup>24</sup> Nocera, Joseph, and Ben Strauss. 2016. *Indentured: the inside story of the rebellion against the NCAA*.

situations. A high number of these athletes come from poverty, and throughout their college career, remain in the same conditions. In a study conducted by the National College Players Association and Drexel University Sports Management Program, entitled "The Price of Poverty in Big Time College Sport", it was found that " The percentage of FBS (Football Bowl Series playing) schools whose "full" athletic scholarships leave their players in poverty is 85% for those athletes who live on campus; 86% for athletes who live off campus. The average FBS "full" scholarship athlete earns less than the federal poverty line by \$1874 on campus and \$1794 off campus. [Also] If allowed access to the fair market like the pros, the average FBS football and basketball player would be worth approximately \$121,048 and \$265,027 respectively (not counting individual commercial endorsement deals)."<sup>25</sup> These findings alone can show the correlation between the NCAA and sharecropping; the NCAA, much like the landlord of a sharecropper, uses their student- athletes for their own gain while offering them next to nothing in return. NCAA sanctions can also be seen as akin to the harsh rules and regulations levied on sharecroppers by their landlords. In the case of a sharecropper from Georgia, he was punished when he tried to seek work on another farm to make more money. In his recounting of the event, he says " Unknown to my uncle or the Captain I went off to a neighboring plantation and hired myself out to another man. The new landlord agreed to give me forty

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<sup>25</sup> Ramogi Huma & Ellen J. Staurowsky, *The Price of Poverty in Big Time College Sport* (2011).

cents a day and furnish me one meal. I thought that was doing fine. Bright and early one Monday morning I started for work, still not letting the others know anything about it. But they found it out before sundown. The Captain came over to the new place and brought some kind of officer of the law. The officer pulled out a long piece of paper from his pocket and read it to my new employer. When this was done I heard my new boss say "I beg your pardon, Captain. I didn't know this nigger was bound out to you, or I wouldn't have hired him." So I was carried back to the Captain's. That night he made me strip off my clothing down to my waist, had me tied to a tree in his backyard, ordered his foreman to give me thirty lashes with a buggy whip across my bare back, and stood by until it was done."<sup>26</sup> The moment this man stopped becoming a source of income for his original landlord, he was tried, punished, and put back to work. He was punished simply for wanting to do more, to feel free, and to live above what he was used to. In the same vein, former University of Connecticut Men's Basketball player Ryan Boatright was also subjected to punishment in the face of simply trying to be more. Growing up and achieving one's dreams can be hard - it can also be very expensive. For Boatright, growing up in financially tight situations was not abnormal; however, when it came to basketball, he had many supporters that believed in him and wanted to help fund his future. Aside from his mother, his other biggest supporter was his AAU coach. As recounted in the aforementioned book, *Indentured, The*

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<sup>26</sup> "A Georgia Sharecropper's Story of Forced Labor Ca. 1900." n.d. HISTORY MATTERS



*Inside Story of the Rebellion Against the NCAA*, “His coach, Reggie Rose, the brother of Chicago Bulls star Derrick Rose, was a long-standing friend of his mother’s, and over time he became a father figure to Boatright. During a particularly stressful period in the Boatright household, Rose got Ryan out of Aurora, taking him to California, where he spent several days working out with other good players—another thing the best high school players commonly do. When Tanesha bought a used car, a 2008 Chevrolet Impala she needed to get to her job, Rose helped her with some of the payments. And when Boatright went on his recruiting visits—he made four trips in all, including one to the UConn campus in Storrs, Connecticut—Rose covered the cost of an additional plane ticket so that Tanesha could go too.”<sup>27</sup> Ryan Boatright’s mother and coach had been doing all they could to put their superstar into the best career positions and that costs a lot; however, unbeknownst to them, it would almost cost Ryan his collegiate career. The NCAA’s rules on amateurism almost entirely bans any athlete’s reception of sports related funds, especially those that appear to be linked to potential scout steering or professional representation. Although Rose was neither- and his support of Boatright’s career was purely genuine in nature -Ryan Boatright was still declared ineligible to play before his freshman season at UConn even began. The official ruling stated that “ Rose’s financial assistance was an “impermissible benefit.”<sup>28</sup> It was also ruled that Boatright would have to sit out six games and pay \$100 a month until he had repaid

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<sup>27</sup> Nocera, Joseph, and Ben Strauss. 2016. *Indentured: the inside story of the rebellion against the NCAA*.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

\$4,100, which the NCAA calculated was the cost of the impermissible benefit.<sup>29</sup> NCAA investigators even told Tanesha that she should “stay away”<sup>30</sup> from Reggie Rose; they reached the point where they were even telling her who she could and couldn’t talk to! Much like the sharecropper before, the search for more ended up being detrimental; however, this is not due to their lack of effort, opportunity, or support. It is due to the systems that both men served under; systems that are based on oppression, subjugation, and penance – especially when those who serve to benefit the system seek to grow outside of it and beyond it. In the NCAA bylaws, it states that “Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, if students involved in the NCAA should consider their collegiate athletics as hobbies, why are there so many sanctions and so much oversight? Why aren’t athletes allowed to put themselves and their families in better positions financially even though they’ve earned the right to? In a billion-dollar industry, the wealth is solely remaining at the top; why aren’t the men and women who generate these funds ever going to see any of it while they’re working for it? Truly, there are many examples as to why sports and sharecropping can be analyzed and compared; however, the example that stands out the most has to be the NCAA. The way they operate, the way they treat the driving force behind their organization, and the lengths they’ll go to

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> National Collegiate Athletic Association. 1998. NCAA Division I manual.

retain their power and control constitutes an almost perfect mirror to that of postbellum sharecropping.

## Ch. 4 - NBA

While the NCAA rules the college basketball world, within America, the National Basketball Association's popularity, reach, and influence can be felt on a global scale. Over the past seventy-three years, the NBA has enamored millions by showcasing larger than life athletes competing at the highest level for the most coveted prize in basketball; household names like Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, LeBron James, and more all created their legacies within the league and impacted millions of fans around the world as a result. The NBA's cultural significance is almost unrivaled by any other sport due to its global appeal, marketability, and improved, more entertaining style of play. When most people think of the NBA, these are the things they think of; people know of Michael Jordan and have never seen a game, LeBron's Lakers jersey sold out before he was even announced as a member of the team, and league viewership ratings are on the rise. Also, unlike the NCAA organizationally, the NBA usually strives to maintain an image that is positive, they often support their players, and their community work is well documented. All of this operational smoothness allows for the focus of the fans, owners, managers, media, and - most importantly- players to remain on the game of basketball; however,

there have been instances where actors within the league took action off the court and stirred up controversy. Much like a sharecropper is lambasted and punished for stepping outside of his role as a worker, NBA players, officials, and even the league itself have come under fire for speaking out against issues bigger than basketball. One minor example, albeit one of the best examples, of how athletes are treated like sharecroppers involves aforementioned NBA All-Star LeBron James and his fellow NBA All-Star Kevin Durant. During an interview with *Uninterrupted*, the pair were asked about Donald Trump's presidency. They spoke on Trump being unaware of what the American people need and how some of his comments could be considered as "laughable and scary."<sup>32</sup> In response to these comments, TV show host Laura Ingraham heavily criticized the men and their intelligence; she not only called their comments "unintelligible" and "ungrammatical", but she also said " Look, there might be a cautionary lesson in LeBron for kids: this is what happens when you attempt to leave high school a year early to join the NBA. It's always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid \$100 million a year to bounce a ball; Keep the political comments to yourselves. ... Shut up and dribble."<sup>33</sup> She not only challenged their intelligence, credibility, and voices, but - much like a landlord would challenge the idea of a sharecropper being anything more than his laborer - she challenged the idea that these men had anything valuable to offer society besides their bodies and the entertainment

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<sup>32</sup>Martenzie. 2018. "What Laura Ingraham's Attack on LeBron James Really Means." *The Undeclared*, Sullivan, Emily. 2018. "Laura Ingraham Told LeBron James To Shut Up And Dribble; He Went To The Hoop." NPR.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

that is derived from them. This is a perfect example of an athlete being treated like a sharecropper - they're only good if they're working to entertain us. While this incident perfectly sums up the basis of my argument, the word minor was still used to describe it. That's because of the outcome of the situation. The landlord- sharecropper phenomenon can be seen in many interactions throughout sports involving the media, fans, managers, owners, and officials - usually the outcome is not good for the person in the sharecropper role. However, even though Ingraham tried to box LeBron in, his social prevalence and popularity allowed for him to speak out against his critic and reestablish himself as a coherent and impassioned person - not just an athlete. Another example of the landlord- sharecropper phenomenon, with a less detrimental outcome, also involves someone speaking out against certain politics; however, in this case, the landlord is China and the NBA is acting as the sharecropper. Last year, Houston Rockets Manager Daryl Morey posted a tweet; the tweet simply read "Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong."<sup>34</sup> This was in response to protests going on in Hong Kong centering around the Fugitive Offenders' amendment bill; had the bill been enacted, it would have allowed for the extradition of wanted criminal fugitives to territories with which Hong Kong does not currently have extradition agreements, including Mainland China and Taiwan.<sup>35</sup> This caused people to fear the idea of being subjected to the laws of Mainland China; in turn, this could've meant changes

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<sup>34</sup> Boren, Cindy. 2019. "The NBA's China-Daryl Morey Backlash, Explained." The Washington Post.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

with regards to regional autonomy, civil liberties, and freedom of speech. Many Chinese citizens were being beaten and jailed as a result of the protests, and as the videos from Hong Kong poured out, support from the rest of the globe poured in. As stated before Daryl Morey was one of those supporters; however, one of the NBA's biggest supporters -the Chinese government- did not take kindly to Mr. Morey's tweet. The NBA and China's relationship was fairly strong up until their officials saw the tweet that was considered as "criticism and/or opposition to China's political strategy"<sup>36</sup>. The backlash was immediate; Chinese officials had released a statement expressing their anger over Morey's tweet, sponsors began to pull out of their agreement with the Houston Rockets, and Morey was called to be fired by Chinese officials.<sup>37</sup> Fortunately, Morey was not fired and, in turn, gained the backing of NBA Commissioner Adam Silver. He released a statement saying "We recognize that the views expressed by Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey have deeply offended many of our friends and fans in China, which is regrettable. While Daryl has made it clear that his tweet does not represent the Rockets or the NBA, the values of the league support individuals' educating themselves and sharing their views on matters important to them. We have great respect for the history and culture of China and hope that sports and the NBA can be used as a unifying force to bridge cultural divides and bring people together."<sup>38</sup> Although bipartisan in nature, more backlash came as a result of the NBA

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Conway, Tyler. 2019. "Adam Silver Says NBA Supporting Daryl Morey After Rockets GM's Tweet on China." Bleacher Report.

essentially supporting the man who made the “inflammatory” remarks in the first place. Soon, China was canceling league events, cutting larger sponsorship deals, and threatening to limit, if not fully remove, the NBA from their broadcasting network.<sup>39</sup> The Rockets organization alone faced losing 25 million in sponsorship deals.<sup>40</sup> Even after an apology tour from NBA officials, players, and owners, the issue with China still looms over the NBA’s head. One of the NBA’s most lucrative and socially important partnerships was almost ruined by one tweet; however, that is not what we’re focusing on. The focus is that Daryl Morey was punished for speaking out against something other than basketball. When the officials in China disapproved and called for Morey’s removal, Adam Silver – as a commissioner should – stood up for his employee and that employees right to free speech. In return, both parties were punished heavily. This shows how the landlord–sharecropper phenomenon can even extend beyond just the athletes. When the NBA as an organization backed Daryl Morey, they essentially took on an issue that wasn’t liked by their associates in China. In response, they were punished financially – years of good will almost thrown away over a tweet and differing opinions. While both of these examples are minor in the outcome – as in no one being fired or blackballed – these examples also go to show just how deep the landlord–sharecropper phenomenon can go within the sports world.

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<sup>39</sup> Boren, Cindy. 2019. “The NBA’s China-Daryl Morey Backlash, Explained.” The Washington Post.,

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

## Ch. 5 - Olympics

The final illustration of how athletes are treated like postbellum sharecroppers lies at the pinnacle of all sporting and athletic competitions - the Olympic Games. It was originally conceived in 776 B.C as a way for the Greeks to praise Zeus and attempt to match his legendary strength through various games and rituals<sup>41</sup>; albeit almost fading away entirely due to Rome seizing control over much of Greece around 393 A.D, the games made a resurgence over fifteen hundred years later.<sup>42</sup> The first modern Olympic Games took place in 1846; they were held in Athens out of respect to the games' storied history.<sup>43</sup> Ever since then, the Olympic Games have been recognized around the world as the premier sporting event. Over two hundred nations come together and compete in various events including boxing, racing, fencing, basketball, wrestling, and gymnastics. The games allow athletes to not only test their physical abilities against the best competition in the world, but it allows them a chance to become recognized as the undisputed world's best at their craft. Olympians like Micheal Phelps (America, Swimming), Usian Bolt ( Jamaica, Racing), Nadia Comaneci (Romania, Figure Skating), and Sir Chris Hoy (England, Cycling) represent the levels one can attain through hard work, dedication, and the will to win. Most Olympic athletes have dedicated

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<sup>41</sup> "The Olympic Games." History.com.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*



their lives to training and molding their bodies into peak physical condition; this is so that when they reach their platform, they can physically outshine their vast and potentially equally trained competition. This isn't always the case; in fact, some athletes reach physical perfection, dominate the competition, but opt to use their platform in order to bring awareness to issues bigger than "Who was the most superior athlete today?". However - and quite notoriously - the International Olympic Committee has always had a problem with their athletes protesting, speaking out, or advocating for anything politically during their precious and sacred athletic games. Also, due to the pervasiveness of the Olympic Games internationally, the media and many more critics can also emerge if they find the message unsavory, ill timed, or disruptive to the purely athletic spectacle that the Olympic Games were intended to be. The idea that these world-renowned athletes are allowed to give their bodies freely, but when given a platform to showcase their minds-which are just as strong if not stronger -they are instantly shut down is completely disgusting; it perfectly illustrates the landlord- sharecropper phenomenon that can be seen with athletes and those who only care about them for their physical acumen. The phenomenon's place within the Olympic Games doubles as not only an allusion to sharecroppers and landlords, but it is also considered as one of the most polarizing moments in sports history. The 1968 Olympic Black Power Salute sent shockwaves through the sports world. The image of Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Peter Norman standing atop of

the podium was circulated everywhere; Tommie Smith and John Carlos' fists were raised and their heads were bowed in what was immediately deemed an act of protest. In fact, the athletes were protesting the social and racial issues that were plaguing America at the time. It had only been months after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and with the Civil Right Movement leveling out, Smith and Carlos both believed that a more poignant act of protest was needed. So they chose to dress symbolically and take a stand; they wore black socks and no shoes to symbolize African-American poverty and black gloves to express African-American strength and unity.<sup>44</sup> Smith also wore a scarf and Carlos beads- in memory of lynching victims.<sup>45</sup> Both men achieved their goal of protest, and even Peter Norman remained unmoved - an act of solidarity with his teammates. Unfortunately, for politicizing the Games, U.S. Olympic officials, under pressure from the International Olympic Committee, chose to suspend medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos; they were then kicked off of the trip and sent back home early. The backlash was almost immediate; Doug Hartmann, author of *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath*, says that this immediate reaction from the IOC, the U.S Olympic Officials, the international media, the America media, and the American people was due to the fact that "It was seen as an example of black power radicalism,"<sup>46</sup> and that is why

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<sup>44</sup> Blakemore, Erin. 2018. "How the Black Power Protest at the 1968 Olympics Killed Careers." History.com., "Olympic Athletes Who Took a Stand." 2008. Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Hartmann, Douglas. 2003. *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: the 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath.*

“Mainstream America [especially] hated what they did.”<sup>47</sup> There are definitely other factors for why the mainstream abhorred the Olympians’ actions; however, the aspect being analyzed is why they were punished. It should be noted that both men were highly ranked in track in field; before the protest, they both respectively won the bronze and gold medals for that year’s Olympics. They could clearly compete and dominate at the highest levels; however, for politicizing the Olympic Games, they essentially had their whole careers thrown away. They would be blackballed from a system in which they gave their all for. Peter Norman, the Australian runner who chose only to wear a pin for equality and stand in solidarity with the duo, also practically lost his entire career as well. The Australian Olympic Committee blackballed Norman and would not allow him to compete for them ever again– he qualified for the Olympics every year, as the fastest Australian man, until his forced retirement.<sup>48</sup> These men were at their peak and they had just proven that they, physically, could beat the best the world had to offer. It wasn’t until they stepped out of their spikes and into the minds of the American consciousness that their physical prowess, along with everything else about them, became moot. Unfortunately, the act of punishing athletes for using their Olympic platform to bring awareness to issues outside of the games has not gotten old enough for the IOC. In an extremely similar situation, albeit differences in race and

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Blakemore, Erin. 2018. “How the Black Power Protest at the 1968 Olympics Killed Careers.” *History.com.*, “Olympic Athletes Who Took a Stand.” 2008. *Smithsonian.com.* Smithsonian Institution.

method of protest, fencer Race Imboden and hammer thrower Gwen Berry decided to participate in their own acts of protests at the 2019–2020 Pan American Games (the games fall under the jurisdiction of the Olympic and Paralympic Committees). Imboden, after helping the U.S fencing team win gold, decided to take a knee on the podium; later on during the games and after winning in individual competition, Berry raised her fist and bowed her head as the national anthem played – a la Smith and Carlos. Unlike during the time of Smith and Carlos, acts of protests by athletes have been formally forbidden by the IOC; instead of them just shaking up the world with their protest, they were also breaking the rules to do so.<sup>49</sup> Imboden says that he chose to protest due to the various social and political issues going on in America; he was protesting “Racism, Gun Control, mistreatment of immigrants, and a president who spreads hate.”<sup>50</sup> He also said that “ For me to kneel during the anthem, it’s the hardest place for me to get to in my sport — the top of the podium, so to sacrifice that moment for a bigger cause was why I chose to do that.”<sup>51</sup> In response to her actions, Berry simply stated that “A lot of things need to be done and said and changed. I’m not trying to start a political war...I just know America can do better.”<sup>52</sup> Regardless of why they did it, both athletes were still placed on a 12 month ban from the Olympic and Paralympic Committees; in fact, a warning was issued to any other athletes thinking of using the olympic

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<sup>49</sup> Bieler, Desmond. 2019. “U.S. Fencer Race Imboden given 12-Month Probation for Pan Am Games Protest.” The Washington Post.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

platform for issues other than sport- harsher punishments and sanctions will be levied.<sup>53</sup> This all goes to show that, even at the highest level of sports and athleticism, athletes are still treated like sharecroppers- built to work only. The Olympics is supposed to be home to the greatest athletes the world has to offer, but whenever an athlete tries to show their true intellect and passion for something more than sport, they are punished by the committees, staunch critics, and the media. Even at the highest echelon of athleticism, the sharecropper-landlord phenomenon can be seen - a true tragedy endured by those who simply want to be more than just a body utilized for the entertainment of others.

## Ch. 6 - Role, Perceived Threat, Control

The landlord-sharecropper phenomenon is highly prevalent within the sports world; at this point, that fact is incontrovertible. By analyzing what the phenomenon is, its place within sports, what the phenomenon means for each involved party, and through various examples throughout the world of sport, the conclusion on its existence and prevalence was reached; however, what has not been discussed is why it exists. How can these athletes, who risk everything for our entertainment, still be mistreated? How can these athletes, who have access to money, influence, and a solid platform, still be silenced?

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

Well, in the same vein as postbellum sharecropping, it boils down into three factors - role, perceived threat, and control. For the postbellum sharecropper, these factors essentially defined the nature of their relationship with their landlords. The role factor focuses on who the person is and what level of power they possess; this can include other subfactors like race, profession, socioeconomic status, or opportunity. The perceived threat factor speaks to the chance that the person in the lesser role - the sharecropper or athlete- poses a threat to the upper establishment. Finally, the control factor centers around the actions executed by the upper establishment in order to contain, silence, or punish those in the lesser roles; this is usually done to either establish dominance, stifle the "lesser" role's growth, or remove them from the situation altogether- if not all of them at once. In the case of a postbellum sharecropper, their role was considered as being "lesser"; in the early days of the sharecropping boom, most sharecroppers were recently freed slaves who were poor, without many options, and simply looking for a chance at a better life. Unfortunately, most of them were also highly uneducated, and the only thing they knew how to do was use their physical labor in order to begin building a new life. The landlords - often rich, educated, white males - knew this and took advantage of the sharecroppers' plight and personal disparities; they'd offer these men and women contracts that would be guaranteed to benefit only themselves. Once locked into a contract, most sharecroppers would find themselves indebted to their landlords; these debts would allow for

the landlords to gain control of their lives and labor. However, once control is established, the threat of losing control also appears. This leads to the perceived threat factor; in the case of postbellum sharecropping, a perceived threat could be considered as a sharecropper seeking more than one employer, attempting to branch out independently, or attempting to step outside of their “role”. Essentially, whatever actions that could be deemed harmful to the landlords’ power, control, or the societal status quo were deemed as impermissible. In turn, the control factor exists as a solution to any perceived threats. Sharecroppers who tried to do more than work were often hunted if they ran, beaten if they resisted, or jailed in peonage camps if they really vexed their landlord; even the threat of sending a sharecropper to a peon camp was enough of a deterrent to sway them back into full compliance. These three factors - role, perceived threat, and control - were the driving force behind why sharecropping existed and thrived; they’re also the same factors responsible for the prevalence and propagation of the sharecropper-landlord phenomenon found within sports. These factors are why it exists in the first place. In the case of the role factor, one must think about what role the athlete plays in sports and any subfactors. In sports, the athlete is the commodity - they are what sells. They also represent how a game is supposed to be played at its highest level. They are the workers on the frontline of our society’s entertainment; however, they are only the workers and the sports industry is still a very lucrative industry. There are many levels to the various

organizations, and even though it is the players giving their all on a daily basis, it is the people at the top – the general managers, executives, and owners– that hold all of the power. The situation only deteriorates further as the subfactor of race comes into relation with the role factor. Many athletes, especially in the case of the major American sports leagues, are people of color. When looking at the National Basketball Association, well over seventy percent of players are African– American; for the National Football League, their percentage of African American players hovers around the seventy percent mark as well.<sup>54</sup> This goes to show that it is people of color doing the hard work of building careers, making moments, crafting memories, creating highlights , and generating the reasons to watch sports; however, this is where the en masse P.O.C activity stops – at the base level. When looking at P.O.C influence at the highest echelons of sport, the governing bodies or the team owners, the numbers are almost non–existent. In the NBA, there are literally only three team owners of color; in the NFL, there are only two and, surprisingly in contrast to the NBA, neither of them are African American. In sports, the factor of role plays a huge part because the sports aren't being controlled by people whose interest and investment in the game is seen daily; they're being controlled by a disproportionately white board of men who only care about their profit and their pockets. As the landlords in this relationship, these independent actors control the actual actors who create the collective,

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<sup>54</sup> Lawrence, Andrew. 2019. "The NFL Is 70% Black, so Why Is Its TV Coverage so White?" The Guardian., Sonnad, Nikhil. 2018. "Racial Breakdown in the NBA." Atlas.



communal feeling felt when watching sports; however, for them, the game is not about chiefly about community or feelings- it is simplified into dollar signs. The landlord relationship can also run much deeper than just the owners and their drive to make money; the fans and media can also take on the role of landlord. Just like the game serves a purpose to the owners, it also serves a purpose to the fans and media. Some people hold connections, opinions, emotions, or ties to certain sports; although the athletes might be more socioeconomically well off than the fans and media, the fans and media hold the athlete's job in their hands in the same sense an owner might. The fans are the driving force behind sports; they not only dictate popularity, but they also influence profitability. This, however, can lead fans to have a rather personal connection to sports. Coupled with their consumer control over the entire market, the role of a fan can mirror a landlords because their role also involves the second factor- the perceived threat factor. In the case of Colin Kaepernick, the misinterpretation of his message led to his message being perceived as a threat. To the NFL, his message was a threat to the simplicity of the game, the patriotic stance the NFL has maintained for years, and the money they'd lose over the backlash. To the fans and media, his actions were also deemed as a threat to the game and as a slight to the entire nation's Armed Services. Was that truly what his message was about? Of course it was not; however, this is how his actions were perceived. He intended to bring awareness to an issue bigger than himself, and instead, it ended up blowing way out of proportion. In

the case of Lebron James being told to “shut up and dribble” because he chose to speak out against a system that he lives in and knows is unsatisfactory, was he wrong for speaking his mind? Of course he was not; however, his words were perceived as misguided and uninformed by certain “political pundits” within the media. It all comes down to how certain things are perceived by those higher up, and unfortunately for athletes, speaking out or standing up for one’s personal beliefs is usually perceived as being dangerous – either to the landlord’s spoils or the status quo. In the case of Tommy Smith and John Carlos, they completely obliterated the status quo- of 1960s society and the Olympic Games respectively. In response, they were met with the third and final factor- the control factor. As stated before, this could mean a beating or some form of chastisement for a sharecropper; however, for the athlete, the punishments are much different. Tommy Smith and John Carlos were not beaten; instead, they were denied their ability to ever perform at the highest level of their sport again. They were removed from an institution that they had given everything to because they chose to speak out against such a polarizing issue, at such a polarizing time, while on the world’s paramount athletic platform. They threatened the simplicity of the games, the simplicity of ignoring race relations, and the simplicity that comes with believing that athletes shouldn’t speak out on serious political and societal issues. Was it wrong for them to see themselves as more than just athletes? Was it wrong for them to take a stand against the tyranny of social injustice dealt against those

whose skin was not white? Was it wrong for them to do so on a stage where all races and religions alike could see and possibly join along in solidarity? The answer to all of these questions is no. It is the same for Race Imboden and Gwen Berry; although they were punished - due to a rule that definitely stemmed from the 1968 Olympic Black Power Salute- they weren't truly wrong in their protest. The only issue was that these athletes, who are thought of as just entertainers, workers, or bodies, tried to transcend the role they were prescribed; however, by attempting to be more, the perception that this transcendence endangers the image of the sport, the money to be made by the sport, personal opinions of the sport, or more arises. This is why the relationship between the athlete and the owners, fans, and media mirrors the relationship of a landlord and a sharecropper. Along with the three factors, it's simply about the landlord (the owners, fans, media) wanting control over the sharecropper's (athlete's) body and the benefits reaped from said body; anything more is considered as a threat to the landlord's superiority and individual gains that must be stomped out. This phenomenon is truly disgusting to see in sports, especially when one realizes how much these athletes gave to get where they were and how much they risk it all for in the name of social, political, or personal justice.

## Ch. 7 - Conclusion

It was stated at the beginning of this work that, through examples and analysis, it would show how modern-day athletes can be seen as “today’s sharecroppers”, who work for higher wages and world-renown but are still given the same personal respect, professional respect, and job security of an actual postbellum sharecropper. Now, at the conclusion of this work, the veracity of that claim is truly evident; athletes can be considered as modern day sharecroppers. Sharecroppers were not treated like intelligent, opinionated, and highly aspirational human beings; they were treated like and looked at if they were beasts of burden - only good for the labor and money they could produce for their landlord. Professionally, if a sharecropper aspired to or attempted to do anything more than work, they would potentially be putting their lives at risk; this meant that job security operated on a system like this - either you faithfully worked for your landlord or you didn’t work at all. This could mean being beaten and having your contract signed over to another landlord, being sent to a peonage camp for being noncompliant, or worse. While peonage and beatings are not being utilized to keep athletes in line, the nature of sharecropping can still be seen within sports today. As far as personal respect goes, the analysis has shown that much of the personal respect an athlete receives stems from their physical gifts or achievements; the respect for the athlete’s true mind, intellect, and opinion often fall by the

wayside. The case is the same in the area of professional respect; as long as an athlete “stays in the place of an athlete”, they are respected by all - the media, fans, managers, owners, etc. However, the moment an athlete branches out to issues on society or politics, their entire professional career and legacy are placed in jeopardy. Of course, many athletes end up risking their careers because, much like any other human being, they too have opinions and causes that mean something to them. In turn, an athlete will use their heightened platform to speak on certain issues, protest the disparities they see, or even those that are foreign - but hit home- for them. This is where the job security aspect comes into play; the moment that athletes attempt to utilize their platform for the advancement of issues that do not concern their athleticism or sports in general, they are subject to many forms of punishment . This could mean sanctions, fines, firings, blackballing, slander, and any other act of retribution; the practice of punishing those who attempt to be more than an athlete has existed for many years and is still prevalent to this day. Along with the fact that both institutions - modern day athletics and sharecropping- are similar in nature and practice, it was also seen that both operate and thrive on the same three principal factors- role, perceived threat, and control. The role factor speaks to each party's -sharecroppers, landlords, athletes, owners,etc- place in the relationship with regards to power, influence, and control. The perceived threat factor speaks to the moment when the entity within the higher role - the role of power and influence- deems that the lower

entity is a threat either to them personally, financially, or a threat to the status quo. In response to the perceived threat, the control factor is established; in order to manage or remove the threat, the higher entity will utilize their power, influence, and control to resolve the issues and reestablish control. The relation in nature between the treatment of athletes and the treatment of sharecroppers, as well as the fact that both institutions are derived from and operate on basically the same three principal factors, speaks to both how and why these institutions exist, thrive, and relate. Along with this, examples were also utilized to illustrate the relationship between both institutions; these examples were coming from different sports at different periods of time, and they involved different protests on many different platforms. From the NFL blackballing Colin Kaepernick due to his controversial advocacy against police brutality or LeBron's personal intelligence being questioned live on television, there are many examples of athletes being disrespected and disregarded simply for standing up for something bigger than themselves or the sport they play. There are numerous examples of athletes being told that their only worth exists within their physical bodies. There are numerous examples of athletes being told that their voices and cries do not matter. There are numerous examples of athletes risking and losing everything because they chose to be more than what they were told to be. These athletes are like us- just regular people seeking to do extraordinary things; nobody is perfect, but these individuals give their everything to get as close as they can. They put in the

work for themselves and the work to entertain the masses; some spend their lives striving to reach the pinnacle of their craft. However, others also strive to reach these platforms in order to spread a message. They opt to utilize their platform for the betterment of issues beyond sports, and unfortunately - due to a system that promotes physical work and shys away from social work - doing so is considered as taboo and a threat to the existing establishment. This should not be the case. Athletes should be treated as human beings with opinions and cares; they should also be allowed to express those opinions and care on the platforms that they either built or worked hard to get to. It is their right. While sports will always be entertaining and bring people together, the fact that it mirrors the system of postbellum sharecropping is extremely discouraging and it says more about those involved in sports than the games themselves. Perhaps, in order to protect and maintain the sanctity of the sport, the focus should be on who is watching, covering, and governing the games instead of who's playing them.

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