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The Professional Sports Shell Game: A Black Canadian's Reflections On Twentieth-Century American Sports History

Fans were wavin the red white and blue
It seemed strange to me / was it strange to you?
Brotha's on the street / And everyone is scared a ya
So how could ten Africans represent America?
Bullshit / It didn't mean a thing
'Cause in the same year / wc saw Rodney King¹

THE RECENT COINCIDENCE that Tiger Woods won the Masters golf tournament on the weekend immediately preceding the fiftieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson's first appearance in a Major League Baseball game pointed out the unavoidable link between the best and the worst elements of American sports history. This coincidence finds expression in the song lyrics that stand as the epigraph of this article and emphasizes a central paradox that has emerged from a national story that began with the promise that all men were created equal while simultaneously enslaving a considerable proportion of its population. These peculiarly American paradoxes have long fascinated me in my observations of America, and my own personal paradoxes encourage me to be sensitive to the parallelisms and contradictions around me. I watch the United States from walking distance, having been born and bred in Canada,

¹Spearhead, "Dream Team," *Home* (Capitol, 1994).

but my parents still identify themselves most strongly with their country of origin, Jamaica; I am a black citizen of a country that still characterizes itself overwhelmingly as white; I am a professional literary scholar as well as an avid sports fan; and I am a teacher who (I am told from time to time) looks like a basketball player, and I did play basketball until the third year of my undergraduate degree. This self-description suggests that I am opportunely situated to address some of the issues pertaining to sports and race, since I have experienced these dynamics from two crucial perspectives, formerly as participant, now as commentator. My 'some-of-this-but-also-some-of-that' persona in turn characterizes my discursive strategy here. I want to incorporate some of my personal reflections on the experience of living next to a country whose history has been frequently shaped by people who look like me, and I will assemble a scholarly explication of how an awareness of twentieth-century American sports history promotes a complex and nuanced understanding of contemporary America.

I have always looked to the public prominence of African Americans—usually male basketball players—for inspiration and for examples after whom I could model myself. (I balk at the term 'role model' because it seems to have become just another example of the base commercialization of African-American culture. Remember that Charles Barkley's now-famous declaration that he is "not a role model" was delivered in an advertisement for the Nike Shoe Company.) The way men like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius Erving carried themselves on and off the basketball court, while being scrutinized by hostile crowds and often uncomplimentary media coverage, helped convince me that my parents were right: that it was more important to carry myself with dignity and pride than to respond to every small-minded slur in a manner that would probably only get me into trouble.

Basketball players remain logical sources for young blacks to look to for inspiration because they are so visible. Their facial expressions and—for better and worse—their personalities are available for all to see *while they are playing*. This ostensible intimacy expresses itself most noticeably in television coverage of basketball games which, because of the comparatively small size of the

basketball court, permits closer camera shots than do the expanses of the football field or baseball diamond. Basketball players are also close enough to the spectators that they can sometimes even hear individual comments from the crowd. They are actually quite vulnerable while they play.

Both of my parents—Owen Stewart and Winnifred Stewart (née Reid)—were born in Jamaica and met in Canada. They were married in 1963 and were part of the first wave of non-white immigration to Canada in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I mention these facts because it is quite possible that, had my parents met in Jamaica and moved to North America together to start their family, they might have moved to an American city, where they would have been assured of meeting other blacks. Instead, they decided to stay in Ottawa, Ontario, the nation's capital and the city where they met. In 1963, as my mother has told me more than once, one could travel the streets of Ottawa for two weeks without seeing another black face.

This part of my personal history reminds me that, but for the random tricks of fate and circumstance, I might have grown up in an American city instead of in Ottawa. This recognition is of immediate importance to this article because I am six feet six inches tall and, as I have already mentioned, did play basketball in high school and university. Even though I now teach in a university English department, my body type and skin colour continue to encourage people—including some students and colleagues—to see a basketball player when they see me. I firmly believe that, had I grown up in a large American city instead of where I did, I would have been encouraged to concentrate on athletics and discouraged from academics.

Why would I make such a claim? An anecdote will further clarify my contention. In my last year of high school I played on a pretty good high school basketball team. I was also a solid A-student. Nevertheless, an Economics teacher I had that year once told me he didn't think it mattered to me what grades I got in his class. His evaluation baffled me at first, but I eventually realized that he based it upon what he thought he saw in me as opposed to what was actually happening in front of him. It was easier for him to accept the stereotype of the black basketball player who didn't care about his academic performance than it was to reconfigure his

imagination to accommodate the possibility that the same person could embody both academic and athletic achievement. Although this coexistence of abilities shouldn't be seen as antithetical, it often is. If such an episode could happen to a good student in a school system so far removed from professional basketball as the Carleton Board of Education is from the National Basketball Association, it is reasonable to infer that my attendance in an American high school, which might have already sent someone on to professional basketball, might have further skewed my educational experience towards that goal instead of one more geared towards academics.

I am not arguing that, had I grown up in an American city, I would now be winding down a hall-of-fame NBA career. Even if I thought that highly of my now long-expired prowess on the basketball court (which I don't), I recognize that the odds against making it into any professional sport are stacked astronomically against any individual. Do the math. There are only 348 available positions in the NBA in total (29 teams times 12 players per team). Even if only half of these positions are occupied by established players on multi-year contracts, then the number of actual positions available falls to 174. Furthermore, the NBA's draft of college (and, increasingly, high school) players consists of only two rounds. This means that a total of only 58 players is drafted *each year*. There is also an increasing number of players from Africa and Europe trying to break into professional basketball in the United States, as well as all of those American players currently playing in lesser American and European leagues, still hoping to win a tryout with an NBA team. So, the number of available positions is very small, and must accommodate all of the American high school phenoms, university stars, and international legends who all believe that they are just one good game away from landing that big contract.

Statistically speaking, then, one's chances of becoming a university professor are incalculably greater than those of becoming an NBA player. It is safe to say that similar odds persist in the other major sports. This Darwinian world may be expressed in simple economic terms. A low supply of available positions in the NBA drives up the price of attaining one of those positions. The effective price of one of these few positions is the opportunity cost

of countless hours spent on the court instead of in the classroom, and the disadvantages faced by anyone who chooses this short-term career path once he enters the larger non-athletic job market.

The athletic market economy was described succinctly back in 1968, by Melvin Rogers. Rogers has the credibility of experience, since he coached Elvin Hayes when Hayes was a high school basketball star in Louisiana. Hayes was the leader of the Washington Bullets' championship team of 1978, was voted to the NBA hall of fame in 1990, and, in 1997, was selected as one of the fifty greatest players in NBA history. Quoted in a 1991 *Sports Illustrated* feature entitled "The Black Athlete Revisited: How Far Have We Come?" Rogers stated: "A white kid tries to become president of the United States ... and all the skills and knowledge he picks up on the way can be used in a thousand different jobs. A black kid tries to become Willie Mays, and all the tools he picks up on the way are useless to him if he doesn't become Willie Mays."² Substitute Michael Jordan for Willie Mays and Rogers' statement still holds today, thirty years later. This simple fact is obscured by the glitz and glamour of the big-money professional sports marketing machine. The level of excellence that we see in professional sports does not come without a price, and that price often takes the form of time spent honing non-transferable athletic skills.

Basketball is the most graphic instance of these economic facts at work because of the high concentration of African Americans playing it at the elite level. You need only watch an NCAA or NBA game to notice that the vast majority of elite American basketball players are black. The NBA's own figures from the 1996-97 season show that 82% of its players are black.³ For these players, the sacrifices have been largely worthwhile. They are fabulously wealthy and, to varying degrees, famous. However, we rarely hear about all of those young men who fall through the cracks before attaining the big NBA payoff. The acclaimed film, *Hoop Dreams*, and Darcy Frey's book, *The Last Shot*, are two of the very few concerted looks behind the image of the prominent African-Ameri-

²W.O. Johnson, "The Black Athlete Revisited: How Far Have We Come?" *Sports Illustrated* 5 Aug. 1991: 41.

³"The NBA at 50: On the Up and Up," *Sports Illustrated* 11 Nov. 1996: fold-out timeline.

can athlete. Unfortunately, these comparatively rare instances have not been able to compete with the barrage of commercials, movies, and broadcasts of major sporting events which dominate the popular media.

One of those major sporting events—the NCAA men’s basketball tournament—provides a view of the stacking of the odds against the professional sports career. “March Madness,” as it is called—in an unintentional moment of truth in advertising—starts with 64 teams competing for the championship. That’s 768 players, based on the 12 players per team average. Even if only one quarter of these players intend to make it to the NBA, that’s still 192 players, *each year*. When you remember how many other players there are who also hunger for a chance at the NBA, and that the league drafts only 58 players, you realize that there simply isn’t room. Once again, economic scarcity rules the day.

These rules of economic scarcity and their implications for the individual NBA hopeful are obscured by the disjunction between appearance and reality. The NBA’s appearance is very encouraging for African Americans. In addition to the 82% figure of black representation among players, there is also the money. The average salary of an NBA player, again according to the NBA’s own figures from 1996–97, is \$2.1 million and climbing.⁴ But the reality is that most of the men who compete for those dollars will never get them. Also, the amount of sacrifice it takes even to get close to making it to the NBA means that by the time an individual realizes he is not going to make it, he has already been put behind his contemporaries (and future competitors) in academic and job training.

Remember, I am now and have always been an avid sports fan. This is not meant as an anti-sports diatribe by some poor embittered soul who was always chosen last for pickup basketball games. Nor am I arguing that sport is completely without redemptive value. Personally, I believe that my athletic involvement in my younger days contributed to my professional well-being by providing me with experience in dealing with pressure. Whether one

⁴“The NBA at 50: On the Up and Up.”

is facing a job interview or a last-second free throw, adequate preparation is crucial to succeeding under pressure. But the transferable skill of handling pressure is only of use as a supplement to a solid academic background. I am arguing that sports—more specifically the dream of big-money professional sports—is not a worthwhile long-term career goal for most of those who are encouraged, to the exclusion of all else, to pursue this precarious career path. Moreover, the dream of professional sports superstardom exacts its greatest toll on young African-American males.

Because of the ubiquity of anti-black racism in the United States, with its concomitantly low expectations of African-American intellect and humanity, dreams of professional sports riches can emerge as reasonable responses to the effects of racism, as Claude Steele has persuasively argued. Steele describes a cause-and-effect relationship between what he terms “racial devaluation” and the pervasive underachievement of African-American students at all levels of academic preparation and socio-economic status. He argues that black students operate under a “jeopardy of double devaluation ... that does not apply to whites.”⁵ The school environment necessarily subjects all students to the possible embarrassment of making a mistake in front of others; but while “blacks risk devaluation for a particular incompetence, such as a failed test or a flubbed pronunciation ... they further risk that such performances will confirm the broader, racial inferiority they are suspected of. Thus, from the first grade through graduate school, blacks have the extra fear that in the eyes of those around them their full humanity could fall with a poor answer or a mistaken stroke of the pen” (74). Under such intense pressure, it is no surprise that many African-American students “disidentify” with school. Even though the individual may still be encouraged by family and friends, the jeopardy of devaluation elicits the reaction of changing one’s self-conception so that students disidentify “with achievement.” In order to insulate themselves from the vulnerability they experience in such an environment, students will change their self-conceptions, outlooks and values, so that academic achievement is no longer so important to their self-esteem. Once this disidentification

⁵Claude Steele, “Race and the Schooling of Black Americans,” *The Atlantic* April 1992: 72.

takes place, African-American students have been found to emphasize the importance of “peer-group relations—a domain in which their esteem prospects [are] better” (74). Steele summarizes the school environment as a place where, for “too many black students ... more concertedly, persistently, and authoritatively than anywhere else in society, they learn how little valued they are.” Under such strain, African-American students will, naturally, go “where they [have] to go to feel good about themselves” (78).

Steele’s theory of “racial devaluation” describes pervasive consequences which are directly germane to a discussion of the prominent African-American male athlete. Athletics have long stood as a field in which African Americans have been seen to, allowed to, in fact encouraged to, excel, and, at first glance, appear to provide an escape from the effects of devaluation. Between devoting time and energy to something that validates one’s worth and something that makes one feel vulnerable, the choice is clear. Once again, this is great for the very few who ‘get over’; unfortunately, they are not the only ones who make the decision to concentrate on athletics instead of academics. If Steele is right, and I think he is, then the pernicious by-product of the relationship between racial devaluation and athletics is the perpetual manufacture of an ill-prepared underclass of young men who have been discouraged from pursuing the safer path of academics in favour of the very high-risk, often no-reward alternative of athletics. The perpetuation of the image of athletics as a ‘way out of the ghetto’ actually reinforces economic inequity for the many while allowing the success of the very few.

Moreover, even the escape from vulnerability that athletics appear to present is incomplete. While African Americans have excelled in the major professional sports in the United States (football, baseball, and basketball), this excellence has been historically circumscribed by the positions the athletes play. The most obvious example is the continued dearth of African-American quarterbacks in the NFL. As a Canadian, I have witnessed first-hand one result of this phenomenon, since the Canadian Football League has long been the beneficiary of the NFL’s reluctance to draft African Americans at quarterback. Chuck Ealey, Condredge Holloway, J.C. Watts, Tracy Hamm, and Reggie Slack are just a few of the men who have excelled as quarterbacks at American colleges over the last 25 years

and then moved to the CFL after not getting a chance to play quarterback in the NFL. The most illustrious member of this fraternity is Warren Moon who, after starring at the University of Washington, spent six years in the CFL before finally being granted the opportunity to play for the Houston Oilers in 1984.

Such positional limitations in football emphasize the dynamics of racial devaluation that occur in the classroom by playing out this pressure in a much more public forum. To reconfigure Steele's formulation: The black quarterback is already subjected to the scrutiny that accompanies his high-profile position. But any mistake he makes is magnified by the possibility that his individual errors might confirm the broader racial inferiority of which he is already suspected. If, for instance, in Super Bowl XXII, Doug Williams, the only African American ever to start a Super Bowl game at quarterback, had performed as Neil O'Donnell did for the Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XXX—in which O'Donnell threw two interceptions that were returned for touchdowns—it is safe to surmise that the stock of black quarterbacks in general would have been negatively affected. As it stands, O'Donnell merely 'had a bad game' and subsequently signed a lucrative new contract with the New York Jets, who were obviously willing to overlook his crucial miscues. As fate would have it, Williams turned in one of the great Super Bowl performances, throwing five touchdown passes in his team's victory. But the pressure on that one man must have been enormous. I know how nervous I was just watching the game, thinking how terrible it would have been—with a resonance far beyond that one game—if he had played badly.

I am not alone in feeling this way when watching an individual black person who, for a moment, seems to represent all of us. Lisa Baird, as a newspaper columnist for *The Record* in Bergen County, New Jersey, expressed the same sensation of dread that many blacks feel when an individual is scrutinized by the public eye. In fact, Baird's story illustrates the point about devaluation in two ways: she wrote about it, and then experienced it *because* she wrote about it. In her essay, "A Churning in My Gut," Baird describes the feeling she had when she heard that a gunman had killed five commuters on a Long Island Rail Road train in December 1993. She says the feeling was accompanied, for some, by a silent prayer: "Lord, please don't let him be black." As it turns out,

Colin Ferguson is black and has since been convicted and sentenced for the shootings. Baird writes that “black people can’t just mourn the loss of life or denounce the crime. This society does not allow us that level of humanity. We also have to deal with the fallout, and the double standards and contradictions that fallout reveals.”⁶

The content of Baird’s article addresses how racial devaluation works when a whole nation of people is suspected because of the actions of one individual. But the context out of which the article emerges demonstrates a further layer of vulnerability. Baird’s article was suppressed by *The Record*. Her editor told her that since “her column usually ran on the front page of the local section of the newspaper—and not the editorial page ... it should rely more on the opinions of others, rather than on her thinking.” DeWayne Wickham recounts this story in his Introduction to *Thinking Black: Some of the Nation’s Best Black Columnists Speak Their Mind*, the 1996 collection in which Baird’s piece was published for the first time.⁷ Baird resigned from *The Record* soon after its refusal to print her article.

Baird was trapped in a paradox similar to that evident in Williams’ appearance in the Super Bowl. At first glance, both appear to have ‘gotten over’ in the mainstream (read: white) society—Williams starting at quarterback in the Super Bowl, Baird writing opinions for *The Record*. Yet the status of having ‘made it’ actually exacerbates their sense of vulnerability as a result of the unusual (in Williams’ case, unprecedented) positions they find themselves in. Williams can’t merely play well; he must play superlatively or risk confirming others’ worst race-based suspicions. As a columnist, Baird is in a position to comment on this vulnerability as it pertains to a horrible crime. But her vulnerability in a predominantly white workplace, writing for a paper whose readership is predominantly white, leaves her without a voice at a critical moment.

⁶Lisa Baird, “A Churning In My Gut,” *Thinking Black: Some Of The Nation’s Best Black Columnists Speak Their Mind*, ed. DeWayne Wickham (New York: Crown, 1996) 160.

⁷DeWayne Wickham, Introduction, *Thinking Black* 22.

Betty Bayé, in another article in *Thinking Black*, entitled “Let’s Talk Black,” summarizes this sense of vulnerability as it is experienced by African Americans who have ostensibly ‘made it’: “I, as an African-American woman and columnist, necessarily find myself having second thoughts about how to tell it like it is about some member of the race when most of my readers are white, including some who make no secret of having an anti-black agenda. The burden of the African-American columnist working in the majority media is not one shared by our white colleagues, or even by other African-Americans who write in the black-owned media.”⁸ Bayé’s last point is crucial. Her emphasis on the difference between the burdens of black columnists who write for white-owned newspapers, as opposed to those who write for black-owned newspapers, clarifies Baird’s experience at *The Record* and Williams’ position in the Super Bowl. There is always an added pressure to be borne by those who proceed into uncharted terrain. Under that kind of pressure, I probably would have concentrated more on basketball and less on school, too. Actually, the underlying message begins to look more like the quintessential paradox: African Americans appear to be damned if they do and damned if they don’t, subjected to the oppressive heat of devaluation whether they stay where the larger society tells them to stay or attempt to push society’s limits. With all of this in mind, one can only feel a renewed sense of admiration for Jackie Robinson’s accomplishment fifty years ago.

The image of Jackie Robinson suggests a potentially more positive outcome to the paradoxical relationship between racial vulnerability and sports notoriety. But my contingent optimism relies upon a perspective that looks beyond the dazzling displays of fame and fortune produced by contemporary media coverage of American athletics and looks instead to sports history. The calling of Robinson’s name is the sort of gesture that provides what I see as one way out of the trap of devaluation. Major League Baseball’s 1947 decision to allow Jackie Robinson to play professionally is the most often cited inspirational story from African-American sports

⁸Betty Bayé, “Let’s Talk Black,” *Thinking Black* 164.

history, but isn't the only one. Three years later, for instance, professional sports provided another of these advancements. On 25 April 1950, as Nelson George recounts in his history of African Americans' influence on basketball, *Elevating the Game: The History and Aesthetics of Black Men in Basketball*, the Boston Celtics selected Chuck Cooper in the second round of the college draft. The Washington Capitols chose Earl Lloyd in the ninth round (the draft was much longer then), and within a few months the New York Knicks purchased Sweetwater Clifton's contract from the Harlem Globetrotters. While all three, therefore, "have a valid claim as the first African-American in the National Basketball Association," as George writes, "it was the little-known Lloyd who, in an October 31, 1950, game in Rochester, New York, became the first of the trio to step on court as a player in uniform in the NBA."⁹

The record of American sports history has preserved these individuals, but they must be sought out. Irrespective of the myriad contemporary hardships these individuals endured, they exist as monuments to African-American history and courage and perseverance. They stand as 'role models,' and bestow upon that now-hackneyed and commercialized expression a more meaningful signification. In calling their names and in exhorting sports spectators and commentators to know these names, I employ the political strategy of bell hooks. In her essay collection, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, hooks cites her grandmother's and great-grandmother's names on several occasions. "I call their names in resistance," she explains, "to oppose the erasure of black women—that historical mark of racist and sexist oppression. We have too often had no names, our history recorded without specificity, as though it's not important to know who—which one of us—the particulars."¹⁰ hooks invokes her matriarchs as great historical figures and introduces them into the official historical record.

All African Americans—all people of African descent—have these figures in our pasts. (I cited two of my own when I called the

⁹Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: The History and Aesthetics of Black Men in Basketball* (New York: Fireside, 1992) 95.

¹⁰bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990) 116.

names of Owen and Winnifred Stewart at the beginning of this article.) hooks's instruction to state the particulars describes the position Tiger Woods adopted after winning the Masters. In accepting his green jacket, the trophy for winning the Masters, Woods announced: "I wasn't the pioneer ... Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder, Ted Rhodes, those are the guys who paved the way. All night I was thinking about them, what they've done for me and the game of golf. Coming up 18, I said a little prayer of thanks to those guys. Those guys are the ones who did it."¹¹ Gestures like this, more than his superlative skills as a golfer, promise to earn Woods a place as a worthy role model for African Americans, young and old. At an unprecedented moment, when he could have simply stayed within the boundaries of sport, he took the opportunity to call names and state the particulars of those lesser- or unknown pioneers who have been all but erased from the lily-white history of golf. With his Masters victory, Woods becomes only the third minority member of Augusta National Golf Club, as all Masters champions gain honorary members' status. (This membership information dates back to April 1997, although Augusta National has not, to my knowledge, at least, embarked upon any recent minority recruiting campaigns since Woods's victory.) He joins Ron Townsend and Bill Simms, the club's other minority members (we should call their names, too, since it is safe to infer that they too have earned such acknowledgment). His calling of names was a selfless and noble gesture in an age of sports so often characterized by selfishness.

I am separating Woods's superlative skills as a golfer from his potential as a role model because it's important to hold the two things apart. It would be a shame if his importance were limited to *just* his golf skills. That's right. The 21-year-old player who won the Masters in his first attempt as a professional, became the youngest player ever to win the event, the first African American, and the winner by the largest margin in the tournament's history, would be limited if he were seen only for his golf game. He marks an important social moment as well, because, as Pierre Bourdieu has said, "we are altogether justified in treating sporting practices as a relatively autonomous space, but you shouldn't forget that this space is

¹¹David Westin, "Tiger Tracks Into History," *Augusta Chronicle Online* 13 April 1997, online, internet, 12 May 1998.

the locus of forces which do not apply only to it.”¹² Bourdieu’s evaluation is borne out by the roster of African-American male athletes whose names ring with historical—not just athletic—significance. Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and, with time, Tiger Woods, signal crucial political and social moments in twentieth-century American history.

I may clarify my point about Woods being diminished when considered only as a golfer by comparing him briefly to Michael Jordan, easily the most prominent African-American male athlete of the last ten years, and a man whose name, it is fair to say, would have appeared incongruous if included in the above list. The distinction between these two high-profile athletes also adds to my discussion of vulnerability and lends a more complex focus to the positions of Doug Williams and Lisa Baird. Nelson George summarizes Jordan as a “major symbol of nicely assimilated black America. Michael Jordan—commodity, pop star, all-African-American guy—is a true basketball buppie (a Black yuppie).”¹³ Jordan has single-handedly revolutionized sports marketing. The huge endorsement deals now available to Woods would not have been possible without Jordan’s precedence. Nevertheless, he is still just a basketball player. It would appear that this is a choice he has made, just as Woods, in accepting his green jacket, accepted the role of being more than just a golfer.

He and Jordan are further associated because of their ‘cross-over’ appeal—their attractiveness and acceptability to white viewers, consumers, and advertisers. Here, too, Jordan’s precedence affects Woods’s success and introduces a more sombre note to my heady predictions regarding Woods’s place in sports history. With the increase in television sports coverage and the accompanying revenues now available from commercial endorsement contracts—precipitated in no small part by Jordan’s unprecedented commercial success—it is possible that Woods’s public persona may be determined more by corporate interests (as would appear to be the case with Jordan) than by political or social conscience.

¹²Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990) 159.

¹³George, *Elevating the Game* 236.

Woods is the first African American to reach such superstardom in a sport that has historically barred blacks from participating. Like Williams in the Super Bowl or Baird in the newsroom, his victory at the Masters takes on a significance that far exceeds himself as an individual. When an NBA player misbehaves in public, no individual is rendered more vulnerable, since the NBA is now so dominated by blacks. It is true that all the players risk reinforcing negative stereotypes, but they run this risk as a group. By contrast, the brunt of any unpopular action taken by Woods would be borne entirely and singularly by him. Thanks to the large population of black players in the NBA, then, Michael Jordan can choose to be just a basketball player. He is able to concentrate on playing superlatively and making endorsement deals without having to make statements that acknowledge his place in a much larger political, social, or historical context. In other words, because of the ethnic composition of the NBA and the long-standing expectations of blacks' superior athleticism, Michael Jordan is able to occupy the ostensibly incompatible positions of the greatest basketball player the game has ever seen, and just another black player in a league already dominated by blacks. His prominence derives from within a pre-existing set of structures which costs many more African Americans than it helps, but has done nothing to alter those structures.

The position in which I locate Jordan shows how the professional sports shell game keeps its participants and its spectators guessing. The shell game—in which the player must guess which of three shells is covering a pellet—is a particularly apt metaphor to describe the dreams of many African-American male athletes and the mechanisms that influence their dreams. The shell game is, after all, a swindle based on sleight-of-hand. The con artist running the game contrives to hide the pellet instead of placing it under one of the shells, therefore ensuring that the player cannot win. The art in the game is to maintain the illusion of fairness, the possibility that at any moment the player might actually win. Once in a while, a Michael Jordan appears to win the game, even though it's rigged. His incomparable athletic and commercial savoir faire serves as the carnival banter that lures unsuspecting players to try to find the illusory pellet. He simultaneously represents the dream of athletic success, the reality that such success is almost impossi-

ble, and a conduit that encourages too many individuals to overlook the latter in the pursuit of the former. Such complexities are inescapable now that a select group of deified individuals has emerged out of a historically despised minority. Without Jackie Robinson there would be no Michael Jordan. But without the ubiquity of Michael Jordan, it is difficult to imagine that the temptation to forego the classroom in order to pursue the chimerical riches of athletics would be as great as it now is.

This paradoxical outcome finds its archetypal expression in the dynamics and implications of American desegregation. Since I started my examination of the relationship of twentieth-century sports history and American history with the signal event of Jackie Robinson's desegregation of Major League Baseball, I will conclude with some reflections about desegregation more generally. On the face of it, desegregation would appear to be an unalloyed victory for social equality. Yet, such has not been the case, as Elijah Anderson explains in *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Anderson describes the segregated neighbourhood as a place where "old heads," men of "stable means" strongly committed to family life and church, passed on their philosophy concerning the nobility of hard work to "young boys," the impressionable young men in the neighbourhood. The old head personified the work ethic, as well as "value and high standards of morality; in his eyes a workingman was a good, decent individual."¹⁴

Since desegregation, however, those high achievers who might have filled the role of old heads have been free to move out of black neighbourhoods, leaving a void often filled by those Anderson calls "new" old heads. This new model is "young, often the product of the street gang, and at best indifferent to the law and traditional values." The new old head is "in many respects the antithesis of the traditional one," since he often makes ends meet "in the drug trade or some other area of the underground economy."¹⁵ The benefits of desegregation that accrue to the select few are more than offset by the larger communal costs incurred by the many who have not 'moved up.'

¹⁴Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 69.

¹⁵Anderson, *Streetwise* 3.

Stephen L. Carter's *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* summarizes this negative consequence of desegregation—a form of brain-drain—on the African-American community. He recounts that in the 1960s and 1970s “sophisticated [black] nationalists” saw affirmative action as part of the problem for African Americans: “By funneling the best and brightest young black men and women into the white-dominated system of higher education, the critics argued, the programs would simply skim the cream from our community, co-opting into the (white) mainstream those who should have been our leaders.”¹⁶

In his memoir, *Colored People*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. articulates more personally the bitter-sweet nature of desegregation. In Piedmont, West Virginia, where Gates grew up, almost all of the “colored people”—a name he uses for a variety of reasons which he explains at the beginning of the book in a touching open letter to his daughters¹⁷—worked at the local paper mill. The mill's African-American employees had long held a picnic each Labour Day since they were banned from attending the white employees' picnic. But, as Gates reminisces about the last “colored” mill picnic, he summarizes what is—to me—most affecting about the stories that are so numerous in African-American history, the stories that make the traps of paradox surmountable and, in fact, a potential source of pride. This is the last coloured picnic because, as funny as it sounds, it is segregated and has thus been ruled illegal: “So the last wave of the civil rights era finally came to the Potomac Valley, crashing down upon the colored world of Piedmont. When it did, its most beloved, and cementing, ritual was doomed to give way. Nobody wanted segregation, you understand; but *nobody thought of this as segregation.*”¹⁸

When I taught *Colored People* recently in an upper-year undergraduate class comprised of seventeen white Canadians and two Asian Canadians, some of my students found the book too sentimental. They felt Gates at times romanticized segregation. While I agree that Gates's memoir is occasionally sentimental, I must also

¹⁶Stephen L. Carter, *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 20.

¹⁷Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Colored People* (New York: Vintage, 1995) xvi.

¹⁸Gates, *Colored People* 213; my emphasis.

admit (although I didn't volunteer this to my students at the time) to having been deeply moved by Gates's picture of the close-knit world which shaped him. Through his eyes I could see how desegregation might not have been welcomed with complete enthusiasm. Besides, what is the matter with a little nostalgia, especially when it celebrates a proud history that has survived slavery, Jim Crow, and the various crushing effects of oppression, and has been distinguished by an indomitable spirit that has not only persevered but thrived under the worst of circumstances?

It is this ability—to make the best of often appalling situations—that is most inspirational about African-American sports history. The unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's 1952 literary masterpiece *Invisible Man* best sums up what I'm getting at: "Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible."¹⁹ This observation is much more substantial than that old chestnut, 'If you're given lemons, make lemonade,' because African-American athletes have distinguished themselves not by merely making a sweet beverage that will provide some momentary relief from the heat, but also by producing expressions and making contributions that are spectacular in their excellence, superlative in their displays. Of course, the paradoxical nature of African-American sports history also suggests why the prominence of African-American athletes might be viewed as an overwhelmingly positive outcome, a sign of progress against relentless oppression. But, while professional athletes are admirable for what they do on the court or field—a final paradox—the rarity of their accomplishments should also remind us of how slim the chances are that we will ever do what they do. The real sources of hope exist just beyond the glitter of modern-day celebrity, in the often unnamed people who quietly made the superstars of today possible at all.

¹⁹Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1952) 8.