

Final report for

Black in Blue: An Oral History

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Research Timeline

January 2024: Hired undergraduate researcher, Morayo Abbey-Bada (Duke class of 2025, Neuroscience and Chemistry)

January-June: Preliminary research collection to help provide context for interviews

June 3: IRB Protocol 2024-0316 for “Black in Blue: The Lived Experiences of Duke’s Black Athletes” was approved (submitted on February 13)

June-August: Contacted and interviewed Black athletes at Duke who just finished their first year on campus

August 5-9: Attended Oral History Center at UC Berkeley’s Online Advanced Oral History Summer Institute, a workshop that gave insight to a methodology that was new to both me and Morayo

October 31-November 2: Attended the annual conference of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) in Chicago, IL – presented the following paper:

**“That’s a whole different issue with me being black and him not listening to me”:
First-Year Black Athletes at a Division I Institution**

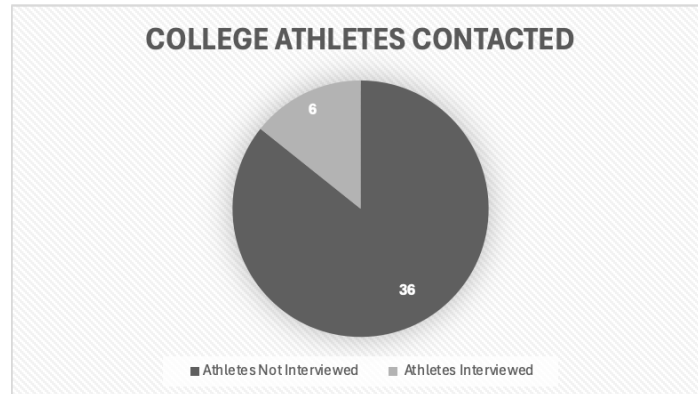
In college sport, Black women and men are often valued for their labor on the playing field but discredited for their intellectualism in the classroom. Further, the same Black body that exhibits extraordinary athletic performances is criminalized and stereotyped in life away from sport. Because of this and other examples like it, a Black player “ever feels his two-ness,” as Du Bois would say, as Blackness is either punished or privileged in different environments. We explore this paradoxical experience, primarily because very little is known about Black athletes’ daily lived reality, even though they often make up a substantial and highly visible portion of a college’s student population. Through qualitative methods, we explore the lived experiences of Black college athletes at a Division I institution, focusing on how they navigated their first year on campus. This presentation will present interview findings that describe the material and social contexts within which contemporary Black athletes are living and playing to analyze how they negotiated these juxtaposing systems so early in their college tenure. We document how these Black athletes narrate their own lives, express their opinions, and observe their campus, team, and larger social environments. This research establishes a vital archive documenting the often-overlooked experiences of Black athletes, providing a foundation for understanding and addressing their unique challenges.

November: Started pitching op-eds and essays for placement with public outlets to discuss this research project, as conducted through the [Health, Ethnography, and Race through Sports \(HEARTS\) Lab](#)

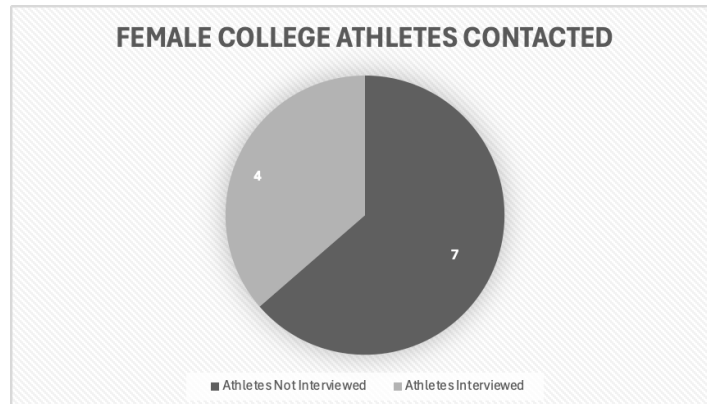
January-May 2025: Will conduct follow up interviews with research participants to submit report to Duke Athletics by May 31

Research Sample

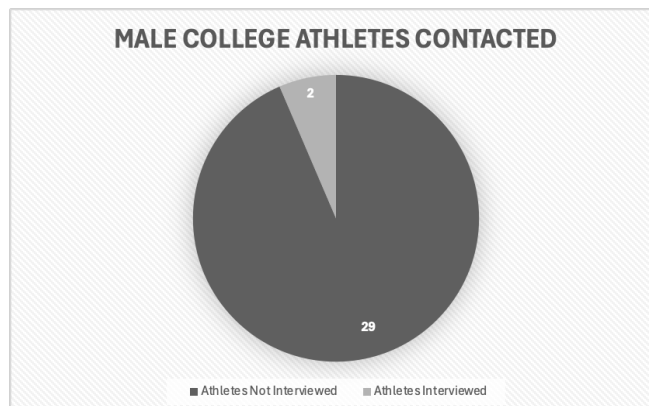
42 athletes were contacted, 6 responded



11 women total contacted, 4 responded



31 men total contacted, 2 responded



Research Findings

Very little is known about Black athlete's daily lives, outside of what is produced by the media and promoted by athletic departments, even though they often make up a substantial and highly visible portion of a college's student population. Given the parameters of this grant, we explored the paradoxical lived experiences of Black college athletes at historically white Division I universities, as these spaces present important racial dynamics, politics of belonging, and questions about inclusion and exclusion for Black students (Howe 2023; Jolly & Chepyator-Thomson 2022). Through **semi-structured interviews with six athletes who each play a different sport**, we focused on how they navigated their first year on campus and their first season playing in college. We are aware that only a small fraction of our potential participants responded to our call to be included in this project, and that more women than men responded to this call, but we believe this had more to do with the timing of our request. These responses are consistent and still manage to tell a comprehensive story about the ways that race, gender, accessibility, and athlete status come to matter in the lived experiences of Black college players.

Overall, we identified four themes that encompass the Black college athlete experience: **support system, college athlete identity, body and physicality, and team dynamics**. Our analysis here is supplemented by direct quotes from our interviews in order to describe the material and social contexts within which contemporary Black athletes are living and playing so early in their college tenure.

1. Support system

Black college athletes expressed a strong reliance on their support systems, which often included close friends, teammates, and family members. These relationships offered a sense of belonging, motivation, and understanding, highlighting the crucial role of support networks in navigating the challenges of being a Black college athlete.

Family members, particularly parents, were consistently mentioned as sources of unwavering support and understanding while athletes navigating intense workouts, playing schedules, and academics. These findings align with previous research by Baker (2016) documenting the experience of six Black mothers throughout their son's football recruitment process. Amongst other conclusions, Baker found that Black mothers play an active role in the process and are heavily invested in their sons' athletic futures. This can also be difficult, when athletes are physically separated from their close family ties.

- "(...) my mom, she'll think things through. She understands it's okay for something to be hard... just on a different level and so when I need to be heard sometimes. I'll go to her."
- "My little brother, when somebody asks who he wants to be when he grows up or who's his role model, I want him to say me. He's the reason I get up in the morning."
- "I'm so close with my family and I really struggled with not being able to see them all the time, and having to communicate virtually..."

2. College athlete identity

Athletes often encounter experiences in the classroom that challenge and shape their understanding of themselves. We note ways a Black player "ever feels his two-ness" (Du Bois 1903:2), as they are often valued for their athletic abilities, but not their academic potential. Additionally, the intersectionality of race and gender in the athletic experience becomes clear. As Simien and colleagues (2019) explain, despite increased opportunities for female athletes, Black

women continue to experience significant racial disparities. This marginalization can limit their athletic potential, educational experiences, and overall well-being. Finally, these athletes referenced religion as being a strong component of their identity. Baker described the Black family as a unit “having strong kinship bonds, high work orientation, strong religious orientation, stability, and cohesive functioning” (2016:32), which is a relevant observation on multiple levels for these Black athletes.

- “I was in a writing class at that time that was again all white and I think the students were shocked at how I could speak eloquently, and that I could articulate my thoughts.”
- “I was very shocked, on the first day in that class. I think the most about my race and because we were talking about racial topics... I was shocked and definitely hyper aware about my gender.”
- “In the classroom, I was second guessing myself.”
- “And what other identifiers: I'm Christian.”
- “Yes, for me to spread the gospel spread, Jesus and so all those things aside it's like I feel like I got to keep going in sports. I love it. And it's giving me the platform. I need to share my Creator.”
- “(...) this game is taking me so many places. Oh, just God! Designed to make me a _____ player has just been, you know... amazing.”
- “I'm very Christian. I have a lot of faith.”

3. Body and Physicality

Hair emerged as a significant topic, reflecting the shared cultural experiences of Black women athletes. As discussed by Cobb (2022) and Joseph and colleagues (2024), hair, often seen as a cultural symbol representing beauty, identity, and resilience, serves as a source of shared bonds and solidarity among these athletes. Beyond its symbolic significance, hair was also a practical topic of discussion. Athletes shared tips and advice on hair care, building a sense of community and support. However, hair could also be a subject fraught with cultural nuances, as it can be subject to stereotypes, fetishization, or even disrespect. One athlete recalled a teammate touching her hair without permission, highlighting the importance of respecting boundaries and understanding the significance of hair as a personal and cultural symbol.

- “Yeah, I feel like there's just certain things that only black people understand, and we joke about it too.”
- “I said, ‘I like your hair. Come here, let's chat about it.’ And so I'm chatting about her braids... And so we're just chatting about mousses and different things...”
- “I also feel like I've just grown as a black woman. For example, my edges aren't done right now, but I learned how to do my edges. I was not doing those before. I have a specific braider and we all go to her.”
- “She's very ignorant. She touched my hair and I was like ‘Okay?’ And they were a fresh set of box braids...”

4. Team dynamics

These athletes experienced a complex interplay of race and team dynamics. Team dynamics can also vary for athletes depending on what team they are on. For some athletes, they are the only Black athletes or one of a few, while others belong to teams that are more racially diverse. For Black college athletes, their support system is also constructed within the context of loneliness on campus, especially within predominantly white institutions. This was confirmed by

a study by Carter-Francique and colleagues, which revealed that “Black college athletes’ social support was based on their role as a college athlete and as a racial minority, thus reinforcing the notion of social isolation and alienation” (2013:231). Within this context, the team can serve as a protective factor where athletes can be around more people that look like them and have shared similar experiences.

The shared experiences of Black college athletes, from the pressures of academic demands to the scrutiny of racial stereotypes, foster a unique bond. This bond, characterized by mutual respect, understanding, and empathy, creates a supportive network that can help athletes navigate the challenges they face. These relationships provide a valuable source of social support and emotional well-being, and teammates bonds can serve as critical lifelines.

- "I honestly feel like when I go to meets I don't know if I would say I'm more aware of my race or less aware of it, because there's so many other schools who have, like, a larger black population..."
- “That's a whole different issue with me being black and him not listening to me. It's definitely gendered. But I think specifically with me because I'm black.”
- "It is a lot of people that look like me. But I think it also is just like this unspoken thing where it's like we all come together."
- "I love my teammates. At the end of the day when I think when I look back and it's all said and done the things I'm gonna miss is just being with the boys, my teammates."
- “I think black athletes that are on my team have a very unique different experience from people on other teams for one because of just the amount of black people there.”
- “The fact that black people are 2% of their population... It's like finding a needle in a haystack to find my people.”

In conclusion, the Black college athletes interviewed in this study offered valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities they faced as they navigated their first year on campus. The findings highlight the complex interplay of race, gender, athletic identity, and academic experiences, as well as the overlapping issues that become important and relevant for this particular research population.

As college athletics continue to grow and expand, it is imperative that we do not neglect the experiences of Black college athletes. It is important to address the unique challenges they face and devote resources to help mitigate these challenges, including creating supportive environments, promoting cultural sensitivity, and fostering inclusive academic spaces. Therefore, the data from this research will eventually be forwarded to Duke Athletics, in hopes that they will design and implement programming, workshops, and resources that can best address the experiences of these Black athletes while they are in school and help to prepare them for life after graduation. Once my theoretically driven research is put into practical use by Duke Athletics, I expect that strides will be made towards both closing educational opportunity gaps and investing in programs that support and enhance Black athletes’ college experiences.

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