CHAPTER SEVEN

Politics and the Black Athletic Experience

In the 1960s, when young African-Americans were asked the question “What do you want?”, we frequently replied: “A [B]lack face in a high place.”

—Manning Marable, Beyond Black and White: Transforming African American Politics

Intercollegiate athletics is admired for its entertainment value and often assumed by many to be apolitical. Frequently, the entertainment value overshadows and dull our senses to the political aspects associated with intercollegiate athletics. The politics of intercollegiate athletics mainly involve the legislative and governance power of national associations, such as, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) or the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), regional conferences (e.g., Big 10, Atlantic Coast Conferences [ACC], Southeastern Conference [SEC], etc.), and the university administration (e.g., faculty athletic representatives). Purely as legislative bodies, these associations, conferences, and committees generally function in the capacity of developing standards involving the following: recruitment, academic eligibility, rule enforcement, competitive safeguards and medical issues, site selection for championship events, and so on. According to the NCAA, “All of the Association’s governing bodies strive to promote student-athlete welfare through legislation and program initiatives.”

Although the original purpose of their existence was legislative, they have evolved to be in the business of marketing goods and services and wealth distribution. This is significant to the plight of Black athletes because they make-up the largest percentage of the athletic labor force that contributes to the NCAA new business paradigm. Similar to the internal colonial political relations outlined in chapter 2, the colonized political powerlessness was in direct correlation with the colonizer’s hegemony. Thus, the colonized were at the political mercy of the colonizer and were totally dependent upon the legislative and governance structure of the plantation, which, as chattel, yielded the colonized no rights.

B. Hawkins, The New Plantation
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The politics of intercollegiate athletics that are relevant to this chapter specifically regard the decision makers who create policies, approve legislation, and enforce the policies that govern the lives of college athletes, in general, and Black athletes, specifically. In the case of Black athletes, their political voice is silenced because of the ideology of amateurism, the paternalistic nature of the NCAA and its member institutions, and because there is a lack of representation at the leadership level—that is, athletic administrators and coaches. This chapter will examine how the ideology of amateurism and paternalism and the lack of representation in leadership positions consign Black athletes to positions of political powerlessness. It will examine the leadership structures of the NCAA and its member institutions to see how it is a microcosm of the leadership structure of the larger U.S. society.

It is important to note at the onset that increase representation does not equate to having a voice in the decision-making process. Remember colonial rule involves governance where political decisions are made for the colonized without their input and often with the aide of indirect rule. Also, remember that the process of indirect rule is a system where the dominant group rules the subordinate with leaders from the subordinate group; therefore, leadership among the colonized is co-opted by the colonizer and become minions that answer to the dominant group.

Furthermore, efforts to create greater representation of Blacks in leadership positions to provide Black athletes with a voice can also create what Manning Marable refers to as “symbolic representation” where, in the case of the Black community, there “is a belief that if an African American receives a prominent appointment to government, the private sector, or the media, then [B]lack people as a group is symbolically empowered.”

The fallacy to this thesis emerged when, as Marable states,

A new type of African-American leadership emerged inside the public and private sectors, which lived outside the black community and had little personal contacts with African American.

Therefore, “a Black face in a high place” has not always equaled change in Black communities or for Black people. For example, the election of Justice Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court represented “a Black face in a high place” yet it also revealed, as Marable suggest, “the inherent contradictions and limitations of simplistic, racial-identity politics.”

Similarly, other levels of Black leadership in the post-civil rights era chart the disconnectedness some Black leaders have with the lives and interests of Black people. However, authentic racial representation will move beyond symbolic empowerment and produce effective empowerment that transforms the powerless of Black athletes into being active and proactive participants in the political process that impact their lives. Thus, changing the leadership structures by increasing Black representation of the NCAA, university administrators, athletic departments, and athlete governing