

DOES THE CREAM RISE TO THE TOP? NCAA DIVISION I PLAYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MERCITOCRACY IN BASEBALL

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ABSTRACT

America is revered as a bastion of meritocracy, where everyone can succeed in any endeavor, so long as they work their hardest. The sport that best represents this meritocratic ideal that Americans propagate is baseball (Wiseman, 2010). Despite the narratives attached to the sport, scholars have suggested that baseball is not as open as popular lore goes because of how expensive and exclusive it has become (Glover, 2007; Ogden, 2005, 2010). The purpose of this research study was to gauge the perceptions of meritocracy and the unequal distribution of resources from 10 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I baseball players at Beaston University (pseudonym). A qualitative interview protocol was used for this research study. After transcribing, coding and a thematic analysis, three themes were found: The American Dream, Pay for Play and Social Connections. The participants believed that although many players are given privileges unavailable to others, anyone could compete in college baseball if they work hard enough. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: college baseball, meritocracy, cultural reproduction

INTRODUCTION

Every year the American public is reminded of the waning popularity of baseball in inner cities, as well as the declining participation of African Americans in the sport (Nightingale, 2012). Some major league players have voiced their disgust at Major League Baseball (MLB) for investing in Latin America at the expense of inner city communities (Nightingale, 2010). In any sport, talent and access do not guarantee elite performance (Starkes & Ericsson, 2003). Glover and Bates (2006) agree that there are opportunities for inner city youth to play baseball, but a grass-roots league does not offer the same competitive experience as a Little

League or travel team (Glover, 2007; Sharpe, 2006). Inner city kids are given various opportunities to play baseball at the recreational level, but there are limitations with respect to the frequency and intensity of participation that is needed to compete at the developmental stage (Ogden & Rose, 2005).

At the developmental level in sport, participants train extensively for skill acquisition and seek “further advantages such as placement on high caliber teams, more and better competition” (Thompson, Barnsley & Stebelsky, 1991, p. 147). Research shows that while more people may have access to organized sport, everyone does not have the same opportunity to compete at the elite level, such as the collegiate or professional ranks (Brown & Macdonald, 2008; Collins & Buller, 2003; Sherry, 2010). To compete at the elite level in baseball, it not only takes access to basic facilities but also extensive training, coaching and social capital (Hyman, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

While baseball is believed to be ideal for social mobility and a bastion for meritocracy, research suggests that the sport was never as egalitarian as believed (Riess, 1980a; Trembanis, 2010). Riess’s (1980a) seminal research demonstrated that the majority of the players in the major leagues during the Progressive Era were middle-class Whites. Elsewhere, Riess (1980b) noted that working-class males were underrepresented in the sport because of a “lack of sufficient skill, which stemmed from a lack of available playing space, inadequate coaching and the need to work full-time at an early age” (p. 297). Baseball is still a sport in which it takes not only talent and access to succeed but also training, coaching and adequate facilities (Hill, 1993; Ogden & Warneke, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction was the theoretical framework for this study. The popularity of Bourdieu’s work is reflected not only in abundant citations in traditional sociology but also the sociology of sport. 1 (Tomlinson, 2004). The French theorist went beyond structural determinism, refusing to accept Marxism with guarantees (Bairner, 2007). Bourdieu surmised that inequality is part of the capitalist system, but he refused to accept that a person’s social class determines everything (Singer & May, 2010). With cultural reproduction, Bourdieu (1977) demonstrated that a person’s class origins do impact his or her prospects in the labor market. Individuals, however, can make decisions that impact their performance in the labor market (Polite, 1994; Singer & May, 2010). The capitalistic system reproduces privilege so that the progeny of the dominant class can succeed in the labor market (Singer & May, 2010). More important, Bourdieu’s research with respect to cultural reproduction, demonstrated that sport is not meritocratic because not everyone is in the right social location to benefit from his or her sport participation (Shilling, 1991; 1992; 2004). With respect to baseball, every player does not have the opportunity to play on a select team or train at a premiere training facility (Gaines, 2011).

Bourdieu and Baseball

The theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu (1977; 1978; 1984; 1986; 1989; 1990) can be applied to the current landscape of developmental baseball. As Ogden and Warneke (2010) noted, the competitiveness of the sport has led to the precipitous decline of Little League teams, which are more inclusive than their select and travel counterparts. Select baseball has made high-school baseball irrelevant (Edgerton, 2009). The ascension of summer baseball reflects the market economy where more sports are becoming privatized, making the publicly funded high-school team obsolete (Andrews, 1999; Coakley, 2009; Swanson, 2009a).

Becoming an elite player in most sports not only takes talent but also access to training facilities, private coaches and a significant amount of time to practice (Starkes & Ericsson, 2003). Roger Bannister, who ran the first 4-minute mile, exploited cultural, symbolic, and social capital before breaking the world record. Because of increasing costs and the importance of social-location, every player does not have the opportunity to play the sport at the developmental level or even capitalize off their participation. For example, to be noticed by scouts and college coaches, the player must play summer baseball, where competition is better and the players play more games (Gaines, 2011). This takes a certain level of financial means. If families find themselves in the working or lower middle class, the opportunity to be noticed by professional scouts or college coaches can be slim to none.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the current landscape of elite baseball. In the process of exploration, the research examined whether players at an NCAA Division I school had access to forms of social, cultural and physical capital at the developmental level.

Research Question

Through this qualitative, interview-based study, the following research question was addressed:

1. How do developmental baseball players reflect on the unequal distribution of resources and meritocracy in baseball?

Significance

As was previously mentioned, baseball at the elite level has become more exclusive (Edgerton, 2009). This research study gauged the perceptions of NCAA Division I Baseball players. The findings will demonstrate whether meritocracy and the unequal distribution of resources are commonplace at the elite level in baseball. The point is that summer baseball teams, amateur showcases and individualized training are not accessible to all players, particularly African Americans, who are trying to make a collegiate team. This is significant because MLB has instituted the Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities (RBI) program to offset the declining presence of African Americans in the sport (Ogden & Hilt, 2003; Ogden &

Rose, 2005). While the RBI teams are not as competitive as their select team and travel ball counterparts (Ogden, 2004), volunteers and civic leaders can still work to expand the access to competitive developmental programs to baseball players in underserved communities. Gaines (2011) noted that the MLB's Urban Youth Academy in Compton, California has been a success, with more than 100 players being drafted by professional teams. Similar to the amateur showcase, in which coaches scout hundreds of elite prospects, the academy's Breakthrough Series gives participants more exposure. According to Gaines, MLB hopes to build an academy in each city that is home to a professional team. Other cities have utilized the fusion of public and private monies to expand developmental baseball opportunities to players in underserved communities, where players do not have the same opportunities for intensive training and increased exposure as their suburban counterparts (Labella, 2012).

The current research study also adds to the growing literature on capital, exclusivity and privilege through the lens of developmental baseball players. Capital in and of itself is representative of an unequal distribution of resources (Spaaij, 2009; 2011). Simply, everyone does not have access to the same level of capital and resources as everyone else. This research will also help sociology of sport scholars tease out the nuances of capital, exclusivity and privilege in sport. The incarnation of exclusivity, privilege and capital may be sport-specific, leading other scholars to use the findings to frame their research questions around different sports.

Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to synthesize literature that examines the current landscape of developmental baseball. Bourdieu's work will be used (1977; 1978; 1984; 1986; 1989; 1990) to interrogate the current landscape of developmental baseball. We will highlight some of the findings of scholars who have used the concept of cultural reproduction in the context of sport.

Social and Cultural Reproduction

Social reproduction theorists argue that America's educational system breeds inequality among the classes because the wealthy are complemented with "curriculums, resources, and programs that prepare students for career success and leadership positions in capitalist America" (Singer & May, 2010, pp. 301-302). More specifically, Singer and May (2010) noted that with social reproduction, middle-class students are better prepared because they are provided with the skills and credentials that are required to succeed in a competitive job market. Reproduction theorists argue that schools in urban and rural areas are devoid of the resources needed to prepare their constituents for jobs in the highly competitive labor market. The upper class exudes knowledge, skills, and etiquette that are valued by the educational system (Bourdieu, 1977). Singer and May espoused the educational system in the U.S. maintains "social inequality by requiring certain academic credentials and experiences that ultimately lead to superior jobs and economic opportunity for those who possess the cultural capital of the economically privileged social classes, the majority of which are White" (p. 302).

For some racial minorities and members of the working class, the concentration of all their time on athletics leads to the “detriment of intellectual development” (Singer & May, 2010, p. 308). The participants in McGillivray and McIntosh’s (2006) study reported that soccer training adversely affected their education. After retiring from soccer, they would have very few educational qualifications to help them compete in the labor market. Singer and May warned social class does play a role in individual decisions and behaviors of young, minority men as “basketball is both the way out and one of the only reasons for going to school” (p. 309). This thought process sometimes stems from parents.

A key concern of cultural reproduction is how parents transmit capital to their children to reproduce privilege (Dagkas & Quarmby, 2012). Swanson (2009a) examined how suburban mothers transmitted capital to their sons in the context of soccer. By interrogating the ‘soccer mom’ tag, which is synonymous with middle-class White women, Swanson demonstrated how these women reproduced their privilege, thereby maintaining unequal class relations. The women in the study steered their children toward sports that propagated traditional middle-class values such as individualism and achievement (Swanson, 2009a). For instance, while soccer is taxing, which is associated with the working class’s preferences for sport, the mothers believe that it fits within the body schema of the middle class because of the “errant belief that it lacks any harsh, physical contact between opponents” (Swanson, 2009a, p. 408). That the women steered their sons to soccer because it propagates certain values is an example of Bourdieu’s “logic of practice” (Smith, 2011, p. 272). In any field, one of which can include sport, agents commit to certain practices to cement their survival (Bourdieu, 1990). For the women in Swanson’s study, encouraging their sons to play soccer is necessary for the transmission of capital.

Sport and Social Mobility

Because of the inequality that is in the capitalist system, the American Dream appears out of the reach for millions of people who are working class (Berger, 1995). Winn (2003) noted that the American Dream is built on a falsehood because the system is rigged to benefit the upper class. Giroux (1994) attributed youth helplessness to the failing economy that has endured contraction in the manufacturing sector. For example, Newman and Giardina (2010) noted that under the economic policies of President George W. Bush’s first term, “corporations and their capitalist elites grew their wealth more than 400%, during the same period, American workers saw their real wages reduced by more than 14%” (p. 1516). Cultural critics continue to point out the economic failures of Western capitalism and its deleterious effects on the working and middle class (Giroux, 1994; 2005; Newman & Giardina, 2010).

With respect to the sociology of sport, scholars have noted how people uncritically accept the belief that sport is the easiest means for obtaining the American Dream (Smith & Beal, 2007). Mullins (2003) noted that so many Americans believe that baseball is a sport where opportunities for success abound. Dubrow and Adams (2010) interrogated the commonly held belief that the NBA is one of the few leagues populated by players who came from humble origins. Their results belied the myth that the NBA represents the best opportunity for the poor to rise “from the ghetto to international fame and fortune” (Dubrow & Adams, 2010, p. 43). They used occupational attainment research as their major framework because it

demonstrates that people from a disadvantaged background fare poorly in the job market. This study examined how the vectors of race, class and family structure factor into the probability of making it to the NBA. The results indicated that the majority of NBA players came from stable middle-class households, with 66% of the Black players coming from an advantaged background. When compared with the labor market at large, Dubrow and Adams asserted, "NBA players as a whole are less likely to come from compounded disadvantaged backgrounds than their counterparts from the general population" (p. 53).

The Body and Physical Capital

The body has been theorized by sociology of sport scholars because of the fact that it is not an objective entity and has been socially constructed in discourse (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Lee, Macdonald and Wright (2009) noted the disparities in privilege between working-class and upper-class males and how the youth viewed their body. The study conducted in Australia, focused on physical capital, which is "involved with maintaining, representing and regulating the body" (p. 60). Whereas Swanson (2009a; 2009b) spoke to mothers, Lee et al. talked to the young men about their uses of capital and perceptions of the body. Lee et al. (2009) found that middle-class males had access to more cultural and social capital than their working-class counterparts. The young men's perceptions of health were consistent with the literature on the bodies of the middle and working class. Working class youth are predisposed to gravitate toward strength and conditioning because they are more likely to acquire jobs that require manual labor, and the upper class on the other hand, aspire to work in a white-collar profession (Booth & Loy; 1999; Bourdieu, 1978).

Hill (1993) found that the majority of professional players supplemented their varsity participation with other kinds of baseball training, including summer camps, tournaments and travel leagues. Edgerton (2009) purported players who attend amateur showcases will likely garner attention from coaches and scouts. Every developmental player does not have the opportunity to attend amateur showcases because of the cost.

Methodology

As previously discussed, the purpose of this study was to understand the training background of NCAA Division I baseball players at a university in the southeast. The study seeks, through a qualitative research approach and a thematic analysis of the data, to address the aforementioned research question.

Epistemic Foundation

According to Hatch (2002), the ability to better understand the world from the perspectives of participants is one of the major tenets of qualitative research. The experiences of college players who have played at the developmental level are important because they have played the sport for several years. Another qualitative researcher may want to understand the climate of developmental baseball from the perspective of players in the minor and rookie leagues. In this sense, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the

entire landscape of developmental baseball because of the spectrum of experiences from intramural players, intercollegiate players and minor league players. The findings from this study will not represent a “grand theory” (Lather, 1986, p. 64) about the climate of developmental baseball, nor can anyone be certain there is an objective reality that is to be discovered through rigorous research.

Emic Research

The exploration of the experiences of college baseball players will be guided by the emic perspective, which aims to upset “the researcher’s traditionally privileged perspective as the knower in the research setting” (Manning, 1997, p. 106). The emic perspective leads to “co-constructed findings” (p. 106), which reaffirms our commitment to speak with the participants and not for them. Emic research is amenable to both the researcher and respondent because of its emphasis on “using the respondent’s voice(s)” (p. 106), while also giving the researchers the flexibility to appropriate the data. In this sense, while the authors may have pre-conceived notions about a particular phenomenon, with emic research, the views of my participants were revealed in the findings.

Participants

A total of 10 baseball players at an NCAA Division I university in the southeastern region of the United States were interviewed. The participants in this region of the country compete in a conference that has produced several national champions in NCAA Division I baseball. The players were between the ages of 18 and 23 (See Table 1). The rationale for choosing these players is based on the fact that their spot on an NCAA Division I college baseball team indicates their elite status. All of the participants competed on summer baseball teams.

Table 1. List of Participants

Name	Age Range	Position
Cooke	20s	Catcher
Womack	Teens	Outfielder
Mayfield	Teens	Shortstop
Pickett	20s	Pitcher
Ruffin	Teens	Shortstop
Hutch	Teens	Shortstop
Williams	20s	Catcher
Milton	Teens	Pitcher
Taylor	Teens	Third Base (Utility)
Bland	20s	Pitcher

Data Collection

A purposive sample was used for this research. The study was first IRB approved at the university where the principle investigator (P.I.) received his doctoral degree. To recruit participants, the P.I. first approached the Associate Athletic Director for baseball at the university. After meeting with this university official, the P.I. spoke to the director of baseball operations about this study. After receiving approval from this university official, prospective participants were emailed by the P.I. to gauge their interest in participating in the study. After approval, participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Once saturation was reached, interviewing ceased. According to Mason (2010), saturation is reached once the researcher is not able to access new information from the participants. The eighth interview did not produce any new information; thus the P.I. stopped collecting data after the 10th interview.

Instrumentation

The interview method was used because of its utility in obtaining rich information, as Glesne (2011) noted that recording devices provide scholars with a “near-complete” (p.115) record of the interview. The average interview lasted 45 minutes. In sport studies, a host of scholars has used the interview as a method to examine the lived experiences of their subjects (Atkinson & Herro, 2010; Eastman & Land, 1997; Robbins, 2004). Amis (2005) noted that interview-based studies are popular with qualitative researchers because they allow for the exploration of that which is not possible with other forms of data collection. In other words, it is difficult to access what is in “people’s minds” (Amis, 2005, p. 105) with participant observation or ethnography. The semi-structured interview was employed because it allows for the researcher to follow a certain protocol, while also enabling the interviewer to be flexible with the trajectory of the conversation (Glesne, 2011). The interviews were recorded on an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder.

Analysis

After transcribing the interviews verbatim in ATLAS.ti, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, the P.I. employed *invivo* coding (Saldana, 2009) for first cycle coding. *Invivo* codes were used because they are the words of the participants and are commonly used for research that is bottom-up (Saldana, 2009). After the first pass of *invivo* coding, the P.I. employed descriptive coding, which, according to Saldana (2009), “summarizes in a word or phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic or passage of qualitative data” (p. 71). After being immersed in the data with *invivo* and descriptive coding, the P.I. and co-investigators used pattern coding, which generated preliminary patterns based on inferences from the transcripts (Saldana, 2009). Pattern coding allowed the authors to reduce the first two rounds of codes to constructs, which later became themes. All of the codes were retrieved and reorganized, with some being merged based on their similarities with other codes.

After three rounds of coding, the P.I. and the co-investigators employed thematic analysis (Grbich, 2007). Thematic analysis was used because it aids the researcher in finding patterns

that are consistent across data and can also yield answers to the research questions (Grbich, 2007). We focused on repeated words or phrases because such terms were “from the views of those being observed or interviewed” (Grbich, 2007, p. 32). One common approach to thematic analysis is the conceptual mapping approach, in which the researcher focuses on repeated words or phrases that emerge from the data that can be part of a common concept (Grbich, 2007). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) noted that one way to distinguish between two concepts is to “direct your attention to the first repeating idea that was not included in the first theme” (p. 63). The conceptual mapping approach was used for this study.

Validity

As the principal researcher, it was our responsibility to ensure that the findings are trustworthy (Maxwell, 2005). As Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) noted, just because qualitative researchers disagree with their quantitative counterparts about objectivity does not mean, “anything goes” (p. 75). Further, qualitative researchers follow certain standards that make their evaluation methods believable (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). Throughout the entire process of data collection and data analysis, we engaged in researcher reflexivity, constantly querying the decisions I made. Watt (2007) noted that reflexivity helps scholars become better researchers as they capture “the dynamic nature of the process” (p. 82).

Member-Checking

To ensure that the transcripts show what the participants actually said, we did member-checking. According to Hatch (2002), member-checking facilitates the “verification or extension of information developed by the researcher” (p. 92). In that sense, we consulted with the participants to make certain the transcripts are reconstructions of their past experiences. The transcripts were mailed to the participants; however, only five replied with their approval and there was not a participant who made changes. Because we want to understand the lived experiences of the participants, it is essential that the authors “present sufficient evidence to the reader that the researcher’s interpretation of the data is both sound and credible” (Amis, 2005, p. 125). The participants did not comment on the findings and discussion section. The final draft of this project was made available to the participants.

Findings & Discussion

Through analysis of the interview transcripts, three major themes were produced that address the research question. Although each participant’s remarks were specific to him, the themes helped me better understand the shared experiences of all the participants; for example, all of the participants played travel ball. The three themes of this study are: (a) The American Dream, (b) Pay for Play, and (c) Social Connections. Each of these themes and their subthemes are discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Theme 1: American Dream

The first theme is “The American Dream”. In this theme, the participants expressed the belief that hard work is enough to overcome any barrier. All of the players mentioned that hard work is what vaulted them to the NCAA Division I level, although in different iterations. Some participants had to outwork their rivals while others had to be resourceful in dealing with adversity. Similarly, Nomai and Dionisopoulos (2002) noted that the ideology of the American Dream perpetuates the narrative that “America is a land of boundless freedom and economic opportunity” (p. 98). Proponents of the American Dream believe in a classless and open society where people can succeed and move up in socio-economic status, so long as they have a strong work ethic (Winn, 2003). For example, Taylor said, “if you are a good high school player, you can play college baseball, anybody can play college baseball, it just depends on the level of how good you are.” For Taylor and the other participants, playing college baseball is incumbent upon a person’s individual capabilities, some of which include work ethic, physical skills and mental aptitude.

One of the more poignant personal stories came from Cooke who expressed how he had to work his way up in the lineup, ultimately becoming the starting catcher in the county championship game. Cooke shared, “He said shut up Cooke, you’re in eight grade and you’re playing on JV and from that time, that time forward, I would be after practice working my tail off.” Although Cooke admitted that he was and still is limited offensively, his coach was impressed with his defensive skills and leadership. Hutch, who is a better player than Cooke because he was drafted, said he struggled during his transitional stage, because he grew eight inches in one year. Whereas he was once the worst player on his travel team, in 2012 he was drafted in the 32nd round of the MLB draft while also leading his high school team in hitting en route to a fourth-straight state championship.

Ruffin, who admitted he was a far better soccer player, faced an obstacle the summer of 2011 when he struggled to adjust to a new traveling schedule. When playing for his normal team, rarely did Ruffin have to travel because his “coach was actually really good at bringing in guys just to see our summer team play.” Ruffin also had to adjust to playing on regular dirt, as the home field for his high school was turf, which makes the ball bounce differently. He overcame the malaise with the help of his mother who accompanied him on most games in the summer. He commented, “I’d just keep working hard, you know what I mean.” Pickett, who was the consummate three-sport athlete, playing football, basketball and baseball all four years in high school, noticed that basketball was cutting into his baseball season. Although playing football in the fall and basketball in the winter cut into his training regimen, Pickett made sure that he was well conditioned by the time of baseball season.

The narrative of the American Dream individualizes success and ignores the trappings of the capitalist system, one of which is the unequal distribution of resources. While it is true that Ruffin and Womack worked hard during their respective summers, the fact remains that their parents helped both of them. Womack’s father paid a former college football player to help with his speed, and Ruffin’s mother was secure enough in her position as a tenured teacher to travel with him during the summer. Taylor’s father gave him invaluable advice about what was required of him to stand out amongst his peers, reflecting the class-based knowledge of which Dagkas and Quarmby (2012) spoke. Bourdieu (1986) noted that upper-class parents not only transmit material resources to their progeny, but they also pass on accumulated knowledge. Further, Dagkas and Quarmby discussed how the parents’

dispositions toward physical activity reproduced privilege in their participants. Dagkas and Quarmby concluded “families employ specific rules related to the development of the child in relation to physical culture” (p. 22). Womack’s father exploited his “network of connections” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249) to help him improve his running style and speed. Parents exploit their economic security, social contacts and accumulated knowledge to help their children excel in sport as the case with Ruffin and Womack.

The participants’ belief in the American Dream can also be tethered to narratives about baseball, which reiterates the fact that anyone can be part of the game (Mullins, 2003). This belief in the assertion that anyone can play the game is reflected in the comment made by Taylor. He commented, “It doesn’t matter how big you are. With baseball, you can have guys say like me; for instance six one, one fifty, or you can have guys like Milton who’s five eight.” For Taylor, baseball represents a level playing field, in which height and weight aside, everyone can play the game. Pickett offers another example of how baseball is a level playing field. He noted, “baseball is baseball, the best person is going to perform all the time.”

Speaking in the context of education, Bourdieu (1977) noted, “by doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give” (p. 494). Bourdieu’s reasoning can be applied to sport because it is perceived as a level playing field in which opportunities abound. Further, the logic is that if someone works hard, an opportunity will be conferred upon him or her. Nomai and Dionisopoulos (2002) espoused that narratives of inequality and a lack of opportunities are excluded to keep the ideology of an open system unchallenged. In sport, it is believed that even a person from humble origins can succeed if he or she works hard (Nomai & Dionisopoulos, 2002). However, Dubrow and Adams (2010) refuted such claims by noting that the majority of the players in the NBA came from middle-class households. Dubrow and Adams’ findings are significant because the NBA is considered a league where most of the players came from working-class households.

Theme II: Pay for Play. The second theme is “pay for play.” The participants spoke of how politics was manifest in the sport, because some of their peers received preferential treatment because of their father’s financial clout. We will begin with the stories of how some players and their parents pay for play. Cooke regretted the fact that he did not attend many showcases because he saw players with mediocre talent vault him to get an NCAA Division I roster spot. He explains how pay for play plays a role in earning a roster spot:

There’s those type of guys on your high school team you’d think would never play but they go to so many showcases, I mean you’re bound to get noticed with somebody that at least thinks you have potential.

Ruffin explained how some of his peers’ parents spent thousands of dollars to have their sons gain traction in the recruiting aspects of the game. He noted, “I know there’s some dads that want a big leap the program and just blow all their money and try to get their son like shown off.”

Womack said that in travel ball, which is a private business, money plays a role in who gets to play on the A-team. He explained how pay for play works in travel ball:

They're running an organization. And I mean you'll have guys that just can't even afford to play with 'em, so they'll come out to a tryout, trying to negotiate a price with somebody and then the other people just won't cooperate.

Womack later mentioned that he was denied an opportunity to play on the A-team because although his talent was comparable to other players, "some people on the A-team had been paying the organization for three or four years." Bland commented on how wealthy parents pay for their sons to get starting jobs on high school teams:

He started every single game, and they could do it because the president of the school would always come in there and be like, this Dinny Thompson, I mean, super-agent tons of money, is giving money to this school, we can't not start his kid.

Williams offered two stories of players getting preferential treatment because of the social standing of their parents. According to Williams, two brothers, one of whom now plays at a rival school in Beaston University's conference, received "first pickings on everything." Williams also explained how a father essentially paid for his son to receive a starting position:

There's also a kid that was on my high school team, that his dad, had donated a lot of money to get that indoor facility, He shouldn't have been in the spot that he was but because his dad was like on the forefront on the whole indoor facility, which was a huge deal at our school.

The participants' stories show how having money aids in getting noticed by college coaches and scouts because of the sheer number of showcases. Also, with respect to travel ball, players who have been paying the organization for a long time invariably receive preferential treatment by playing on the A-team.

The parents who donate to schools and spend money on showcasing their child's talents are an index to the current landscape of competitive sport, in which players compete to monopolize resources to gain advantages. Bourdieu (1986) noted that the family is a site for reproduction, "depending on the type of capital to be transmitted" (p. 496). Within the pay for play sub-theme, the singular form of capital that was transmitted is economic capital. The transmission of the economic capital is then converted to symbolic capital as some players are strategically placed in starting roles at high schools and travel teams. For example, as Bland mentioned, parents donate money to schools to have their children become starters at their high school. Simply, some parents have "front-stage syndrome" (Hallinan & Burke, 2007, p. 67), in which they act as player agents by trying to showcase the talents of their children. The parents in Hallinan and Burke's (2007) study had the financial security to help their children migrate to the more prestigious basketball clubs. Similarly, in developmental baseball, according to the participants, parents do whatever is necessary to promote their children.

Theme III: Social Connections. The next theme is "*social connections*." Within this theme, the participants discussed ways in which people they know had an instrumental role in them earning a roster spot at Beaston University. This is an example of "capital conversion" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 240) because their social capital was converted into a roster spot at Beaston University. Another instance of social connections is when a player is invited to play on a state team because of someone he knows or the popularity of his coach. Some of their travel

ball coaches were friends with an assistant coach or know several scouts in both the collegiate and professional ranks.

Bland's story is emblematic of the importance of having social connections. Bland was not on the radar of college coaches and scouts until his junior year when his high school coach became more aggressive in telling scouts about him. His coach would call scouts to have them come see him pitch in games. Once scouts committed to attend the games in which Bland was to pitch, his coach said "you need to perform." Once he did perform well in front of scouts, he finally received an offer to play at Beaston University his senior year in high school. Taylor's story was similar to Bland's in that his summer coach was proactive in telling Coach Caprio about him. Taylor explained how his offer to play at Beaston University came to fruition because of a conversation between his travel coach and Coach Caprio:

I got a text from actually Hutch, and he said hey my dad, called Caprio for you, you should be getting a call, soon, he couldn't have sent a text to me quicker, because right then Coach Caprio called me.

These examples demonstrate how the participants' coaches' social connections played a role in their getting offers to play at Beaston University. Players also exploit their social connections to earn spots on teams that are prestigious. Womack noted that he gained exposure as a teenager because of his father's employment with a major league team. He noted:

I held my own, against everybody. As far as like, as far as just having an advantage over everyone, that was the only time, when I was fifteen that I thought, I got an opportunity that I hadn't really earned.

Here Cooke rationalized the inequality in developmental baseball:

Coach Stevens got me here. I had an advantage of course. Everybody's going to have an advantage over other people. I definitely feel like other people had a huge advantage over me, so it's not like I'm going to say yeah I had an advantage.

Similar to Womack, Hutch also received an invitation to play for a state team because of his father who is also his summer coach. He noted, "I know, I'm sure my coach had told them, that I needed to play on it." Cooke mentioned that the opportunity to play on a state or nationally recognized team hinges upon not only who you know but the popularity of a high school coach.

It is clear from the participants that social connections are important in baseball. More importantly, the participants rationalize the unequal distribution of resources, including social, cultural and symbolic capital. As Bourdieu (1977) mentioned, in capitalist societies there is a scarcity of resources and the dominant classes monopolize resources to keep the social hierarchy intact. Womack's story is interesting as he did not make the A-team because of politics, but he also recognizes that he had another opportunity that he did not earn. During the interview, Womack indicated his move from the Dirtbags to the Canes was a blessing in disguise, "because they [the Canes] were extremely good about treating everybody fair." Bourdieu noted the social hierarchy is so entrenched that people believe that things are inevitable, making them culpable in their own oppression. Womack is complicit in his own

domination because as McGillivray and McIntosh (2006) mentioned, “agents are subjected to forms of violence, but they do not perceive it that way, rather their situation seems to them to be the natural order of things” (p. 375). For example, Womack understood that although it was clearly unfair for him to play on the B team, in large part because other parents had been supporting the team longer than his father, he accepts the politics in baseball. The football players in McGillivray and McIntosh’s study were aware of their oppression as flexible workers, but they accepted “their position as mere embodied assets, as pawns in a game that cares little about their long-term future once the rich pickings have been exhausted” (p. 375). Womack did not challenge the injustice but accepted it as part of the landscape of developmental baseball--he simply migrated to another travel team. The participants willingly compete in a field where there is a scarcity of resources and advantages are required to gain an edge.

CONCLUSION

Through a qualitative approach and a thematic analysis, the training background of 10 NCAA Division I baseball players was analyzed. Through analysis of the interview transcripts, the following research question was answered:

1. How do developmental baseball players reflect on the unequal distribution of resources, and meritocracy in baseball?

As previously discussed, understanding the training background of NCAA Division I baseball players can help understand how resources are unequally distributed at the elite level. Cultural reproduction theory was used to analyze the interview transcripts of the players participating in the study. It was evident through the stories of the players that at the elite level resources are not distributed equally, and some players cannot afford to be in a social space that is frequented by a college coach or scout. The majority of the participants benefited from advantages they had over other teammates and peers.

Implications

Arguably, the most salient finding was the participants’ unfettered belief in the American Dream, as two of the sub-themes dealt with the aspect of hard work. As mentioned in the introduction, baseball to some Americans is one of the country’s most egalitarian sports, in which a level playing field accords every participant an equal opportunity to achieve success. Future research should examine whether elite athletes believe hard work is the singular most important prescription to success. Simply, individuals are not hapless beings in their field; rather, they make conscious decisions, which they perceive to be salient to their welfare.

Iterations of politics and social connections were another finding from this research. The participants acknowledged that politics played a role in who starts for a travel team, who gets playing time on a high school baseball team and who starts for a state team. The participants also expressed the importance of social connections, which enable some players to vault past others simply on the strength of who they know. Evidence of playing on a team because of

pay for play and social connections is problematic for a sport, because every player does not have the money to play for a summer baseball team. Additionally, everyone does not have access to the same social connections, making developmental baseball an unequal distribution of resources. This is clearly a problem for sport managers concerned with fairness and equality in sport. Sport managers should attempt to ensure that coaches are accredited and have completed several certifications to fulfill certain requirements.

From the findings it is also clear that all of the participants have been playing baseball for more than 10 years and most of them decided to specialize in the sport at one point in time; only two of the participants were multi-sport athletes for all four years in high school. Developmental baseball has become more competitive, with more players trying to seek advantages by playing during the high school baseball and summer seasons (Ogden & Warneke, 2010). The focus on power and performance will only lead to more baseball players choosing to specialize in the sport at some point in their career. Some of the participants mentioned that they sampled sports, but to get ahead in the recruiting aspect of the game they had focus exclusively on baseball. Playing summer baseball not only helps with skill acquisition, but it also increases the chances of a player being noticed by a scout or college coach. More scholars should produce research that empirically examines whether specialization is needed, because some of the participants mentioned that other sports helped them with baseball.

The training background of the players reveals the importance of resources and facilities. For example, having a turf field, especially in the northeastern part of the United States where the winters are longer and colder, can ensure that athletes continue playing the sport during inclement weather. Facilities and equipment extend beyond the purview of the high school as some of the participants mentioned that they had access to an indoor facility that was close to their high school. Kaczynski and Crompton (2006) noted that funding for parks and recreation has been relatively stable in urban areas. Kaczynski and Crompton recommended that practitioners find better ways to provide novel recreation programs with their current yearly expenditures. Funds can be appropriated to build indoor facilities and batting cages for the local high school teams to give underprivileged more opportunities to train year round.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, there are a few recommendations for future research that the authors will document. For this research, the authors were concerned with how NCAA Division I baseball players in the southeast reflected on meritocracy, privilege, exclusivity and the unequal distribution of resources in developmental baseball. In a future study, scholars should apply the same framework to players at schools in the other divisions of the NCAA as well as those who attend community colleges. As Cooke mentioned, there are so many players who have NCAA Division I talent, but they were unable to be seen in certain summer showcases because of the rising costs. It would be interesting to see if players at junior colleges lacked the social capital of the participants in this study.

Another recommendation would be to focus on interscholastic athletes who have aspirations of becoming NCAA Division I players. Scholars could choose different sites; for example, players at a high school in an urban area and another high school that is renowned for its baseball program. When focusing on players at these two high schools, other scholars

should look for similarities and differences with respect to their training; at the high school level, some players cannot play summer ball because of the costs for equipment, fees and extensive travel. The players' training background could vary by socio-economic status and age. Clearly, players from wealthier families can afford to play baseball all year round. As far as age is concerned, freshman players who have aspirations of playing at the NCAA Division I level may not be on the varsity team because of the fact that there are better players in front of them. Some freshman players may have earned a spot on the varsity team, but may choose not to play for fear of a lack of playing time.

Limitations

The findings cannot be generalized to all former developmental players. For example, the authors did not speak to former developmental baseball players who are now only playing the sport recreationally. The researchers could not control for dishonesty or errors reported by participants. However, as Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) noted, instead of being concerned with generalizability, qualitative researchers have turned their attention to transferability. With transferability, the researcher "can expect, the more abstract patterns they describe to be found in different subcultures" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 87). For example, Auerbach and Silverstein found that their research on Haitian fathers could be applied to research on the Promise Keepers. In this sense, with transferability, the abstract findings in this research study could be found in other settings (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Goodman, 2008). The fact that 90% of the participants were White is another limitation. Only one participant was Latin American.

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