

# Bring in "Da Noise": Race, Sports, and the Role of Schools

**All too often, African American boys perceive that they should succeed in sports, not in classrooms. Educators have the potential to reverse this perception.**



**I**f MTV and ESPN are any guide, schools appear to have conceded the struggle for the hearts and souls of this generation of students to the ubiquitous *swoosh*. This is a particularly crucial concession for African American adolescent boys, who tend to be rewarded—by schools and by society—not for how well they can run with an idea, but for how well they can run with a ball. As an African American man, a former college basketball player, and now a university professor, I implore educators not to give up so easily. Schooling, not sports, is the key to success, and children need to hear that message.

## Sports and Race

Adolescents are an easy mark for the blast of advertisements, commercials, and corporate paraphernalia. In the past two decades, the media campaign has become even more focused, intense, and unabashed in catering to youth. Sports images in popular culture are lavish with promises for men (present, but less so, for women)—especially for African American men. Every day, television advertisements, posters, magazines, and clothing transmit familiar images: the muscular arms of airborne black bodies soaring above the arena floor. Although fewer than 2,000 African Americans are in the NBA and more than 30,000 African Americans are physicians, we would never know it from the images that surround our children.

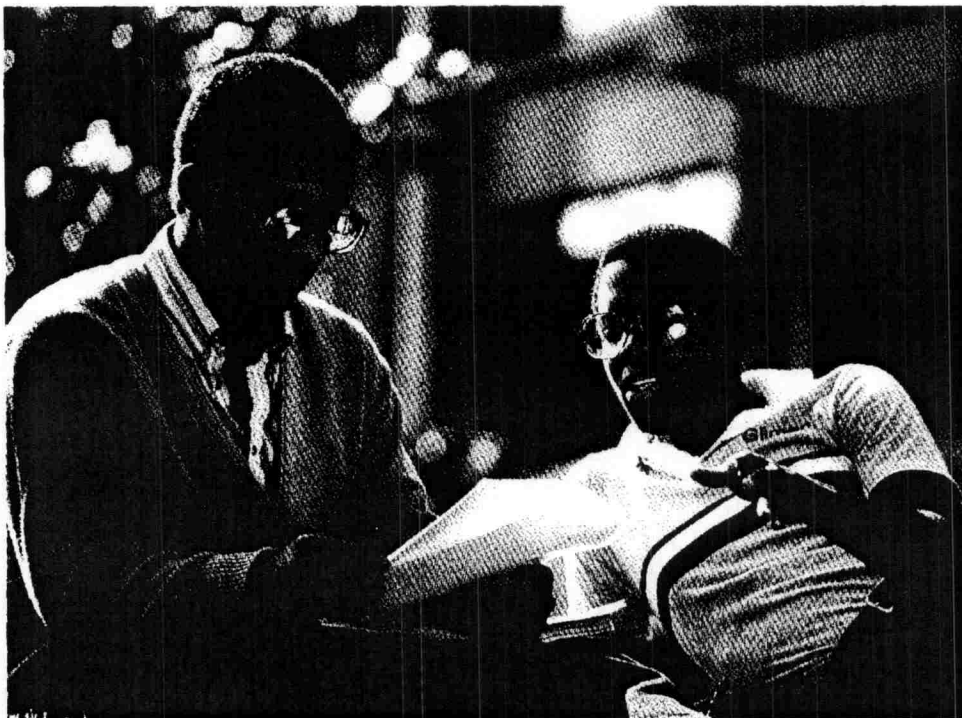
Schools in the United States are also saturated with images of black athlete stereotypes, recognizable on every playground and in every classroom. Not only does the reinforcement of physical ability over intellectual capability diminish the potential of young black men, but it also perpetuates the myth that the road to success is paved with sports contracts, not diplomas.

As I look at the ways that race and sports affect the expectations and dreams that teachers and society have for adolescent African Americans, I am challenged by Maxine Greene's instructions for educators to

reflect on the meanings they have internalized in the course of their own growing up and their own education, since they are now asked to create situations in



© David Stewart/Tony Stone Images



Do colleges pay similar attention to African American boys who do not play basketball? What would happen if educators directed some of that support and reinforcement toward a student's academic future?

## Sports and Schooling

How do sports affect schooling? The short answer is that we don't know. As part of our concession to the invisible elephant-sitting-in-the-front-room known as sport, we have limited serious debate and study about the impact of athletics on schooling to two perspectives: assimilation versus exploitation.

Assimilationists hold that athletic competence can be a ticket out of the ghetto for

which students can articulate what they take for granted and consider eminently natural. (1973, p. 184)

Certain questions follow. What career prospects for African American boys are considered eminently natural? What competencies do we expect of them? How do educators stimulate and encourage some students while they provide minimal attention to others?

## A Personal Perspective

Lompoc, California, is a farming town with little commerce. For most kids, hope comes in the form of a daydream. My first hope was inspired by my 6th grade teacher, whose enthusiasm for science fixed within me a deep desire to be a marine biologist. He honored me with the Outstanding Student award that year—a small, winged angel on a marble stand. My intellectual skills would not be cheered again for many years.

I soon grew to the unusual height, for an 8th grader, of 6 feet 5 inches. From that point on, I earned recognition and awards for basketball. I was encouraged to play hard and to play often—the

better I performed, the more resounding the reward. Blacks and whites, students and teachers, school leaders and neighbors all offered praise. Responding to that reinforcement, I did not miss a game in four years. The public and communal recognition of my potential was more pronounced each year, and so too was my performance. The trophies and photographs displayed in the glass case at school, the newspaper stories, and the school paper articles all became part of my identity.

Early on, I was told that I should begin preparing for a college career. This meant that I would need to pay particular attention to weaknesses that might impede my high-level performance—in basketball, that is. No one paid much attention to my academics. When colleges began recruiting me, they offered guidance and counseling. I remember a letter from a coach I had met at a summer camp: "It was so nice to work with you this summer, Ed. You have outstanding tools! Now you must be motivated to allow those tools to be refined to the highest degree possible. Think big!"

hopeless and disenfranchised black youth (Braddock, 1981) and that athletics can serve as a source of badly needed resilience, discipline, and self-esteem (Braddock, Royster, Winfield, & Hawkins, 1991). Exploitation theorists assert that race relations in sports reflect and reproduce institutional and structural relationships that take advantage of African American student athletes and then discard them when their usefulness expires. They believe that society, school culture, media hype, and disproportionate rewards channel African American boys into sports despite evidence that this channeling leads to dismal academic performance and diminished futures (Edwards, 1983; Edwards, 1984).

My point is not to debate these theories—neither is completely convincing—but to make the case that the issue deserves serious attention. Schools must first be convinced of the powerful position they have, and they must be willing to confront how the intersection of sports and race influences their students' futures.

Although schooling and sports

programs generally occur on the same grounds, they don't exist on the same foundation. And though many fans turn up the volume for athletics, sport remains *message* driven, not *value* driven. Sports rhetoric serves the body, not the soul.

Education offers the truest hope—and no one knows that more than the descendants of enslaved Africans. Playing sports is fun, but it's play and it can't last forever. When schools declare this shared core value, they will discover a natural partnership with African American communities. Schools don't need television advertising or catchy slogans. What they need is the confidence to make their claims explicit to African American children and families: *School* is the domain of hope. How can this be done?

### Keys to Success

Sports programs have tried, tested, and true methods for maximizing the athletic potential of African American boys, and schools could pick up some pointers on maximizing their academic capabilities. Ironically, although educators struggle to understand how best to teach African American children, coaches *know* how to enhance athletic potential. Sports programs have the following elements:

***A firm belief that athletes can perform at a high level if their motivation and encouragement remain focused.*** My skills and abilities, meager as they initially were, were systematically nurtured and honed by coaches from the day I started playing organized ball. Coaches of middle school teams do not see their jobs as terminal. Their challenge is to send kids to the next level with the tools to be successful.

***A collective agreement and sustained effort by teachers, leaders, community members, and families.*** On game nights, I could reliably find people in the stands who were committed to a common cause. This shared goal brought together a wide variety of people with seemingly little in

common—and revealed collective expectations, hopes, and dreams.

### ***Instruction that is intensive, explicit, and future-oriented.***

I learned that only through intelligent, intensive, and focused effort would I see improvement in my game. Coaches gave me detailed instructions on how to sharpen my skills. Each drill and exercise prepared me for college and for my place on the college team roster. I learned to use my time wisely. I also learned that practice was not just about improving my skills but also about practicing in meaningful contexts. I came to expect that learning on the court would sometimes be intense but could also be mundane and repetitious. Even as a freshman, I learned to practice alone and to force myself to conceive of game conditions, imagining my success.

***Emphasis on progress and demonstrable outcomes.*** The greatest transgression that I could make was to become stagnant. The whole point of practice was to work on those areas on which I needed to improve.

One teacher's "personal agenda" was to ensure that my statistics improved game by game until my average was up to par. I learned to keep track mathematically of my progress and to measure my improvement against standards that were clearly defined and public.

***Clear rules and rationale for participation.*** The rules of the game were explicit and applied equally to all. Everyone knew exactly what to expect. We heard and learned the rules not only from coaches but also from other players.

***Assessment of performance.*** I understood that it was in my best interest to hear honest critique and analysis of my performance. Coaches, teachers, peers, and custodians did not hesitate to tell me the truth and to offer advice on how to improve. They expected my respect, and I earnestly

tried to assure them that I would not make the same mistakes.

### ***Tangible and intangible reinforcements for outstanding performance.***

The trophies mattered. They were a source of pride, a recognition of mastery, and a symbol of success. My award-lined shelf honored my personal contributions and those of my teammates.

### Bring in "Da Noise"

Although these principles can be applied to academic life, we should not overlook the limits of the analogy between the rhetoric of schooling and of sports. Schools, unlike sports, are not just concerned with ends. To evaluate schooling solely on its external goals is to misrepresent and misinterpret what schools are about. To be sure, educators do not ignore ends. Test scores, percent-

**Although fewer than 2,000 African Americans are in the NBA and more than 30,000 African Americans are physicians, we would never know it from the images that surround our children.**

ages, and performances do matter. But at heart, education is also the process of becoming. According to John Goodlad, "The essence of the process is the growth taking place in the individual and the meaning of that growth for that individual" (1979, p. 38).

Schools are the only institutions charged with extending the values of home and family into communities and society. They are the engine for freedom and democracy. Only in the classroom can children, regardless of their size, stature, race, gender, or physical ability, be empowered by the vision that teachers instill. This belief is widely expressed, as it should be, in both the words and the actions of teachers.

But for African American boys, all too often the loudest voices are those

**PATHWISE****SOFTWARE:  
A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING****Building a Stronger Teaching Force**

**Use this interactive, time-saving software to structure a successful professional development program.**

The PATHWISE® Software: A Framework for Teaching is an indispensable tool that helps make professional development activities more focused, more personal, and more instructive. It is based on Charlotte Danielson's best-selling book, *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* (ASCD, 1996). This framework analyzes the entire practice of teaching and offers users a common language for improving all aspects of teaching.

*Flexible and easy to use, the PATHWISE Software meets the needs of teachers, mentors, staff developers, supervisors, and administrators. It can be used to*

- build a professional portfolio
- customize the framework to meet local or state standards
- analyze professional development needs across an entire school or district
- generate clear, concise feedback on a teacher's performance



Call 1-800-297-9051 fax 1-215-321-4249  
or e-mail [pathwise@mktgworks.com](mailto:pathwise@mktgworks.com)



## Project Construct Institutes

Project Construct, an approach to teaching that is based on what we know about how children learn, embraces teaching strategies and resources that are consistent with validated theories of learning and development. Institutes provide opportunities for educators to invent practices that support children's ways of thinking and challenge them to construct new knowledge.

☀ Summer 1999 ☀

### for Early Childhood Educators

June 14-18	Columbia, MO
July 12-16	Kansas City, MO
July 19-23	St. Louis, MO
July 26-30	Lamar, MO
August 2-6	St. Louis, MO

### for First-Grade Educators

July 12-16	St. Louis, MO
August 2-6	Columbia, MO

### for Elementary Educators

June 21-25	Kansas City, MO
July 12-16	St. Louis, MO
July 26-30	Columbia, MO

**Project Construct National Center**  
27 South Tenth Street, Suite 202  
Columbia, Missouri 65211-8010  
573-882-1610

**1-800-335-PCNC**  
[www.projectconstruct.org](http://www.projectconstruct.org)  
an equal opportunity/ADA institution



... an approach to teaching based  
on what we know about learning

announcing an academic apocalypse. We need educators who state clearly their belief in the intellectual potential of African American boys and who make explicit the purpose and mission of schooling. I fear those educators who, thinking they are no match for the sound of the *swoosh*, themselves remain silent.

Fortunately for me, a handful of teachers did try. Their small gestures—the comments on a paper, the brief talks in the hall, the sincerity of their commitment to my intellectual development—had an enormous impact on me. How futile those efforts must have seemed against the tide of athletic praise! But their commitment shaped me in far deeper and more sustaining ways than they could have imagined.

To be sure, many youth will find confidence, hope, and even opportunity on the playing field or court. But when play ends, what remains are the skills, hopes, and dreams instilled by educators. Let African American boys hear this message in the classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms—that you believe in education and that you believe in them. ■

### References

- Braddock, J. H. (1981). Race, athletics, and educational achievement. *Youth and Society*, 12, 335-350.
- Braddock, J. H., Royster, D. A., Winfield, L. F., & Hawkins, R. (1991). Bouncing back: Sports and academic resilience among African American males. *Urban Education*, 24(1), 113-131.
- Edwards, H. (1983, November/December). The exploitation of black athletes. *AGB Reports*, 37-46.
- Edwards, H. (1984). The black "dumb jock": An American sports tragedy. *College Board Review*, 131, 8-13.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1979). What schools are for. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Green, M. (1973). The matter of justice. *Teachers College Record*, 75(2), 54-67.

*Author's note:* John Morefield and Ken Sirotnik contributed to this article.

**Edward Taylor** is Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Washington, College of Education, Seattle, WA 98195 (e-mail: [edtaylor@u.washington.edu](mailto:edtaylor@u.washington.edu)).

