

Final Research Paper

Introduction

High school sports provide millions of teenagers every year the chance to take part in extracurricular activities. These activities not only provide the obvious health benefits that come with daily fitness regimens but they also provide an immeasurable amount of perks for the athletes and the communities they play in. However, communities across the country have differing ties to the athletes and high school teams in their area. Two great examples of this are the Smith Center Redmen football team and the basketball players in the rough area of Coney Island, New York. Smith Center, located in rural Kansas, lives and breathes Redmen football. These football players help bring together the community in ways that only sports can. The Redmen football players are also gaining the benefits of high school sports in a small farm town. Some of these young men are even given chances to play collegiate football and further their education because of their participation in one of the most successful football programs in Kansas. Similarly, the young men in Coney Island are using basketball as an outlet to get off the streets of their rough neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are littered with gang violence, drugs and poverty. In this paper I will analyze the differences between these two drastically different urban and rural environments and look at how this has affected the young men living there. I will also dive into an analysis of how race and social class differences alter the opportunities given to high school athletes in different settings across the country. Lastly, I will provide further research ideas for the topics discussed in this paper.

Rural vs. Urban Environments

The differing characteristics of Smith Center, Kansas and Coney Island, New York are both drastic, yet obvious due to their geographical locations. Smith Center is located in the beautiful, yet desolate farm country of western Kansas. “There was nothing but blue sky, miles and miles of it, disturbed only by cotton ball clouds that drifted across a horizon as flat as a tabletop and tiled with the gold, greens, and yellows of healthy crops. A John Deere combine, all shiny metal and sparkling glass, groaned in the distance as it knocked, skinned, and sorted wheat...” (Drape & Lawrence, 2010, p. 11) This quote gives us an image of what the Redmen football players wake up to everyday. Individuals and families that live off the land they nurture inhabit this tough and rugged farm ground. These families might not deal with the crime and violence those in urban environments, such as Coney Island, deal with, but they do face adversity of a different kind. “Jay Overmiller was weeks behind in his soybeans. There was nothing he could do about the rain, though. For weeks it had been soaking his family’s three thousand acres morning, noon, and night... Weather was the master of farm life, and the Overmillers had been slaves to it on these plains since 1882...” (Drape & Lawrence, 2010, p. 166) These families that raise the future and current Redmen football players have to rely on Mother Nature blessing their harvest in order to sustain their livelihood. This type of hardship can be challenging, but when contrasted with the issues that the Coney Island basketball players deal with, it can seem inconsequential. The once prominent immigrant community in New York has now turned into a massive housing project, occupied primarily by African Americans, such as Russell Thomas. “...all but a few scattered rides have been dismantled, most of the cottages and triple-deckers have succumbed to the bulldozers of urban renewal; and in their place the city has erected a vast tract of housing projects...” (Frey, 1994, p. 3) Coming with these housing projects is an influx of

gang related crime. It is because of these dangers that many times, urban children and teens are not afforded the same gift of spending time outside playing sports that those in rural areas have.

“Children in rural schools were found to spend significantly more time outside than children in urban schools over the two seasons. This finding is further enhanced by the significantly more space available to rural school children in both the garden and the neighborhood, as well as the safer neighborhood reported by parents. It may be assumed that more space available and safer neighborhood characteristics are factors that help children spent more time outside playing.”

(Loucaides & Chedzoy & Bennett, 2003, para. 19) These young men are living in an area infested with drugs, gun violence and senseless murders of those living there. This type of danger is one that those living on the plains of Kansas could never fathom. However, for Russell Thomas and his teammates, these are the issues they wake up to and deal with on a daily basis.

“Most summer nights now, an amorphous unease settles over Coney Island, as apartments become stifling and the streets fall prey to the gangs and drug dealers.” (Frey, 1994, p. 4)

Due to this tough atmosphere, the young men that inhabit this area have to turn to other activities to get away from the viciousness that surrounds them. This often means turning to basketball. This outlet provides these kids with the ability to have a better life by achieving athletic prominence and maybe even the chance of an athletic scholarship, which would allow them to escape Coney Island. “Yet even in Coney Island there is a use to which a young man’s talent, ambition, and desire to stay out of harm’s way may be put: there is basketball.” (Frey, 1994, p. 4) A prime example of using basketball as an outlet out of inner city New York is Tchaka, one of the most talked about players in the area. Due to his towering figure and athletic upside, Tchaka was invited to the Nike ABCD Camp, which would give him exposure to the top collegiate coaches in the country. Despite being from the rarely recruited inner city, Tchaka was

given the chance to make a name for himself and receive an athletic scholarship. “Carlesimo and Sullivan exchange admiring, arched-eye-brow looks. Every time they watch one of Tchaka’s games, they glance behind them to see who else may be watching. One day it was Providence coach Rick Barnes... Today it’s Rollie Massimino of Villanova...” (Frey, 1994, p. 55) Without basketball, Tchaka and his fellow peers wouldn’t have the slightest chance of going to college to receive an education that would better their lives and the lives of their families. Instead, they would more than likely raise their own children in the same rough, urban setting that controlled their childhoods. This is comparable to the opportunities that playing for Redmen football has given to the young men growing up in the crop fields of Kansas. For many of these players, going to a college or university aren’t a realistic option due to the financial constraints their farming family’s face. If they want to further their education and have a career other than farming, they must either receive an academic or athletic scholarship. Playing for the Redmen football program gives them a chance to receive the latter. “When college signing day arrived in February 2009, the talent and grit of this senior class received further notice. Marshall accepted a scholarship to play at Hutchinson Junior College... Justin was not offered a scholarship to Kansas State, but Sterling College came up with enough scholarship and aid money to allow him to become the first Nixon to attend college.” (Drape & Lawrence, 2010, p. 264) Despite the radically contrasting urban and rural environments these two sets of men grow up in, they are both using sports as a way to achieve a more prosperous life, by receiving collegiate scholarships to further their educational background. Often times, as in the case of Justin Nixon in Smith Center and Russell Thomas in Coney Island, they are working to become the first in their family to achieve this milestone. However, as mentioned in the Coney Island case, African-American players in these communities must not fully rely on their athletic ability to achieve this chance.

These young men must travel a path full of obstacles working against minorities in urban environments. “The coaches point to kids like Tchaka as proof that the system works. But he is the exception...Tchaka succeeds in this game not because he is the first kid to work hard and play by the rules...They say no to drugs-though it’s the only fully employed industry around. They don’t get into trouble with the NCAA-though its rules seem designed to foil them.” (Frey, 1994, p. 226) In other words, high school teens in both rural and urban environments face obstructions when trying to reach their goals, but its clear that those living in urban environments have much more stacked against them.

Another important aspect that can be analyzed between Smith Center, Kansas and Coney Island, New York is the community involvement with the athletes and sports that these men partake in. As seen across communities in every part of America, sports have a way of bringing together fragile and broken towns. “A single sports team can lift a city, as the New Orleans Saints did for theirs in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. "The Saints gave the city hope. It's something very emotional. We just love the team," one woman told *The New York Times* as she sobbed softly. Even a high school volleyball team can lift an ailing community, as HBO's Real Sports showed with the story of Caroline Found, who was tragically killed in a moped accident. Her teammates, united with the community, rallied to win the state volleyball championship in her honor.” (Sato, 2013, para. 17) This type of community healing and bonding was seen in Smith Center after the passing of a prominent town chiropractor, Steve Kloster. “His passing had hit the Redmen hard. Marshall, Kris, Travis, Trevor, and Colt-all wrestlers-took a ball signed by the whole team over to Janet at her home. All of them dissolved into tears...In his death, he had given the boys much to think about.” (Drape & Lawrence, 2010, p. 190) The Redmen football team, with heavy hearts, proceeded to beat their opponent just a few days later, which helped

bring together the Smith Center community after a rough week. These types of sporting events help the mourning and healing process for fragile towns suffering through tragedies. Whether it's the Japanese women's soccer team winning the World Cup after a Tsunami, or a high school football team bringing together a broken town after the passing of a revered community member, sports are the ultimate bonding activity, regardless of the environment.

In a similar way, those in urban environments, even those perpetuating the crime, support basketball as community bonding because they see the benefits of having one of their own reach high levels of success on the court. "A few years ago community activists petitioned the housing authority to install night lights. And the players themselves resurfaced the court...Even the dealers and hoodlums refrain from vandalizing the Garden, because in Coney Island the possibility of transcendence through basketball-in this case, an athletic scholarship to a four-year Division I college-is an article of faith." (Frey, 1994, p. 5) It may be contrasting to the community bonding that sports have brought to Smith Center, Kansas, but it's still a type of unity amongst neighborhood members. Those living in urban environments know that the ability to have a member of their community reach financial success, will ultimately lead to money being brought back to their poverty ravaged towns.

Race and Social Class Societal Issues

Racial and social class divides have long been an issue for American culture in almost every aspect of society. This divide includes sports, specifically at the adolescent levels. Social affluence gives children, in those families, much more opportunities to get involved in sports and gain the proper training to flourish. This is due to parents in these higher social classes having more money and time to spend on involving their children in a multitude of activities, as opposed to lower social class families who can't spend time away from jobs. "Many immigrant parents

are worried about the next meal or their job. They don't have the luxury that middle-class parents have of getting to Saturday games or joining leagues, so their kids don't get involved at a young age the way a lot of middle-class kids do. It's more of a class thing than a race thing." (Schulte, 2013, para. 7) Furthering this social divide in sports is the fact that many sports now have monetary constraints for their athletes. If athletes can't afford to receive academy training or camp memberships, they will be left behind when they reach high school ages because their skill levels are lagging. Sports, such as baseball, lacrosse and tennis are played predominately by those that can afford the specialized training. Often times, this means minorities, in lower social classes, are stuck playing sports that hinge more on strict athletic ability, such as basketball and football. In the same light, white families are sticking to the previously mentioned sports because they feel as if there is a racial divide and discrepancy in basketball and football. "The division starts early with sports programs for elementary and middle-school students. The soccer teams, sponsored by the Alexandria Soccer Association, are virtually all white, and coached and run by white moms and dads. The Alexandria Recreation League's football teams are virtually all black, with most of the players coming from public housing. I often wonder if the problem in Alexandria is that there are too many of these public housing kids playing football for the comfort of white middle-class parents. Do football and other sports, like schools, have a "tipping point," a level of low-income black participants at which most white families--and often middle-class black families--will start to pull out?" (Schulte, 2013, para. 16) This type of racial and social divide is detrimental for the development of our young athletes. Not only is it perpetuating the racial and social gap that we have seen in America, it is also putting up further obstacles for minorities. "Minority adolescents have a tougher time developing than their "White" counterparts. Minorities must constantly face stereotypes and overcome differences in cultural

norms. For minority adolescents, many factors exist that can keep self-esteem low, which in turn affect all aspects of life. In general, ethnic minority students are reported as having lower levels of educational attainment, grades, graduation rates, and school persistence.” (Chan, 1998, para. 12) By making it challenging for minorities and lower social class members to play sports, outside of basketball and football, our society is causing these minorities to rely on very few opportunities in the few sports they play to achieve financial and educational success. If there were fewer hindrances on minorities, they would be afforded more chances to show their athletic abilities in a multitude of sports, which would increase their likelihood of improving their financial standing in society.

Having said that, due to the realistic nature of where our society currently stands with adolescent sport participation across differing racial and social classes, basketball is still an effective way of helping minorities in urban areas. Many community centers are developing basketball programs as a way of community outreach to help keep teens off the hardened streets of urban areas. The Salvation Army's North Corps Community Center in downtown Charlotte is a good example of a program that has reached success in helping these teens. "We started up a basketball program with literally five high school kids to keep them off the street, keep them out of trouble and keep them motivated and before we knew it it's blossomed it's exploded into what you see today.” (Hamer & Mastre, 2014, para. 7) This program has helped not only lower the chances of their participants getting involved in crime activities; it’s also increasing educational success. Since the inception of the program, they have seen a 100 percent graduation rate for all of the seniors that have been actively involved. Unfortunately, there seems to be fewer and fewer of these types of programs in urban areas, which has negatively affected the minorities and lower social class members that so desperately need it. Cities should look at the success that Charlotte

has had with helping this often-overlooked portion of our society. Or, they can simply listen to first year member, John Blatch's thoughts on the program, "There's not really that after school activity going on and with all the violence going on, basketball is just something that I love to do," he said. "And I just feel like I can come down here and make something of it and he gave me the opportunity and I'm taking advantage of it." (Hamer & Mastre, 2014, para. 13) This quote perfectly sums up why, as a society, we should be actively searching for ways to help minorities and those living in tough, urban areas. By doing so, we can help improve the racial and social divide that is propagating within our country.

Further Research Ideas

As discussed, racial and social divides are a real issue for sport participation numbers. This has been proven true in urban environments, where minorities are not given the same opportunities in sports, other than basketball. Even when minorities are participating in basketball, there are often times obstacles put in their way when trying to acquire collegiate scholarships, which was seen in *The last shot: City streets, basketball dreams*. However, not much research has been done on finding solutions to decreasing these hurdles. For example, how can the NCAA alter their recruiting policies to help improve the number of African-Americans in urban areas receiving collegiate opportunities? Also, further research can be done on the reasons behind the closing of baseball academies in urban areas. In the 1970's and 1980's, many professional training academies were created by MLB organizations. These academies helped spawn an influx of African-American players in MLB, including stars like Frank White. However, in recent decades, MLB organizations have closed these academies and instead have focused on international academies in Latino countries. Research should be done to look at how bringing back these academies, within the United States, could produce a new generation of

African-American's heightened interest and opportunities in baseball, which is predominately white. The last area of research that could help us gain further understanding of sports in society is the analysis of sports instilling a sense of entitlement within young athletes. "It is impossible to rule out the claim that the social status of athletes and athletics may create in some young athletes a sense of entitlement and belief that they are above the law." (Hartmann & Massoglia, 2007, para. 36) This could help explain some of the recent issues of high school athletes thinking they could get away with criminal activity, such as the sexual abuse scandal in the majority white community of Steubenville, Ohio. These three further research ideas will help researchers not just analyze the social and racial issues occurring in high school athletics, but it will also help our society come up with ways to curb these damaging problems.

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