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“Hands up, don’t shoot” or shut up and play ball? Fan-generated media views of the Ferguson Five

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the intersection of sports and social activism in the wake of the police-involved death of Michael Brown. Traditionally, professional athletes have remained silent, or at the very best color-blind, regarding domestic social issues. It is customary for sports celebrities such as Michael Jordan to avoid compromising their status in the marketplace with politics, even when the social matter impacts males who look like them and unswervingly support their craft. Yet, in the wake of the death of Brown, several professional athletes, if only briefly, engaged in their own forms of activism. This article will implore a qualitative content analysis of mainstream media accounts and user-generated content to develop a case study on how Black professional athletes responded to police-involved deaths of Black men. In particular, the author will use the “data” to develop a case study on five St. Louis Rams athletes who staged a silent, pregame protest in the wake of the civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. The case study will include the response from the St. Louis police department and the National Football League. Fan-generated media content about the “Ferguson Five” will be used to analyze public perceptions of athlete activism. A grounded theory approach will be used to examine the immediate and intermediate prospect of civic involvement of professional athletes in social issues.

KEYWORDS
Athletes’ activism; fan-generated content; National Football League (NFL)

“The era of the activist athlete is dead.” —Orin Starn (Clarke, 2009)

Professional athletes are human beings with opinions, causes, and issues they care about, but unlike many everyday people, their status and platform gives them incredible influence in American culture. A proportion of professional sports fans, media, and casual observers favor and encourage athlete involvement in charitable causes, even causes with robust political undertones. Another proportion believes that when it comes to athletes and activism that they should not use their platform, via their workplace, to share their beliefs and advance social causes. Professional athletes who engage in activism must worry about alienating their teammates, their organization, and any retaliation that might come with affecting the brand of an American sport organization. Take the case of Craig Hodges. Hodges, a three-pointer specialist, was instrumental in the initial (three-peat) championship run of the Bulls. When the Chicago Bulls visited the White House after winning the 1992 NBA championship, Hodges delivered a hand-written letter to then President George H. W. Bush. In the letter Hodges expressed his discontent with the administration’s treatment of the poor and minorities (Bondy, 1996). The Bulls waived Hodges afterwards, and he never received an offer or even a tryout from another NBA team. Hodges misfortune exemplifies why no athletes’ activism has approached the level of political and social involvement displayed by Jackie Robinson, Muhammad
Ali, Arthur Ashe, Bill Russell, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos. The stakes associated with athletes’ civic involvement have far more zeros attached than in years past.

As opposed to speaking out on social issues, professional athletes preferred to use their influence to market products that enhanced their personal financial well-being. Athletes do not want to risk the employment status or opportunities to pursue endorsement revenue streams beyond their team contracts. Activism avoidance strategies were most vividly seen when Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest basketball player ever, reportedly explained his refusal to endorse a Democratic Senate candidate, Harvey Gant (against Jesse Helms), in his home state of North Carolina by saying, “Republicans buy shoes, too” (Clarke, 2009). Some of the most successful professional athletes, on the field, including Tiger Woods, have assumed a silent role and never taken a divisive stand because activism can influence endorsement income. “If you want to publicly support a controversial cause because it is truly important to you, good for you. Just know that many advertisers, many fans and many future employers don’t look for trouble,” said one unnamed agent (Thiel, 2014, para. 4). Even so, a set of issues has emerged, such as police brutality, that not only impact Black communities, but Black professional athletes as well.

Not only are athletes hesitant to engage in activism, but sports franchises have adopted a corporate mentality and do not want to get drawn into politicized issues. Sports franchises want to appeal to as many people as possible and are cognizant that fans spend money attending NFL games, on team merchandise, and in a myriad of other ways. Many hot button social issues cut across athlete and fan racial lines. In the case of the NFL fan base, 92% of fans attending NFL games are White (Domowitch, 1989) and 68% of NFL football employees are Black (Tapp, 2014). Professional athletes are a large component of a team that is the staple of a larger brand. “NFL teams are very much aware of brand awareness and they want to do everything in their power to make sure that as many people as possible will come watch football games,” said Chris Kluwe (Waldron, 2014, para. 12). The Minnesota Vikings allegedly released Kluwe, who is White, because of his outspoken support for same-sex marriage (Waldron, 2014).1 Donte Stallworth maintained, “I don’t think the NFL itself has anything against guys speaking out” (Waldron, 2014, para 2). Stallworth played 10 NFL seasons and regularly talks publicly about political issues from the economy to the use of drones. “I think it’s more so the structure of the team and not being in a position to be a distraction to the team. Conduct detrimental to the team is one of the biggest things guys can get in trouble for,” said Stallworth (Waldron, 2014, para 6). The need for professional athletes to address the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, dwarfed the notion of activism being a distraction.

During the first 6 months of 2015, there were 529 killings by law enforcement officers (The Guardian, 2015). A meaningful proportion of alleged police brutality and killings by law enforcement officers involve Black males. Abuse of police power and brutality present a different kind of social issue because some Black professional athletes can relate to the conundrum. On March 23, 2012, LeBron James and his Miami Heat teammates dressed in black hoodies and posed together for a team picture with their heads bowed and their hands in their pockets (Demby, 2012). The gesture was meant to show solidarity with Trayvon Martin, the black teenager shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a White/Hispanic man, while wearing a similar hooded sweatshirt (Blow, 2012). Juan Carlos, one of the Black athletes who led a protest at the 1968 Olympics by raising his fist, wearing a black glove, believed this was a watershed moment: “When the Heat stood up and made that statement, it was saying to everybody, ‘Enough is enough.’ Young people are losing their lives and feeling like there’s no justice” (Sheinin, 2014, para 15). Activism by professional athletes also has recognized larger movements exist to address the extrajudicial killings of Black males.

“Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” is a mantra adopted by Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters, which is a larger movement that started before the Michael Brown shooting. BLM began after the July 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the Florida shooting death of Martin. BLM did receive fresh impetus from the Brown shooting (Demby, 2012).2 The BLM movement is largely based on the protests of 19 deaths at the hands of law enforcement between 2009 and 2015.3 Monifa Bandele says the mantra is about conveying a larger truth (Sexton, 2015). “’Hands up’ is the ultimate truth, and
the reason why ‘hands up’ has gone viral across the country is because it’s a posture known to black people,” said Bandele (Sexton, 2015, para 4). BLM organizers suggests that “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” has a symbolic meaning that is independent of whether Brown’s hands were raised, and it serves as a means of expressing opposition to police violence. Speaking to the Daily Mail, Elizabeth Brondolo, a St. John’s University professor, said, “The truth always really matters, but it’s important to recognize that past experience to stereotypes also influences the perception of hands being raised (Evans, 2014).

Fans, media, and professional sport observers have suggested that professional athletes should be more civically engaged. Ferguson presented a social issue that hit close to home. This study explores the views of St. Louis Rams fans regarding activism by professional football athletes and ponders the future prospect for activism by athletes.

**Conceptual framework**

Under the umbrella of human behavior theories are conflict theories, which emphasize the social, political, or material inequality of a social group while critiquing broader sociopolitical systems (Wallace & Wolf, 1999). Conflict theories tend to contrast dominant ideologies and draw greater attention to race, gender, and sexual orientation power differentials. Sears (2008) suggests that disadvantaged people have structural interests that run counter to the current situation, but that once they become engaged they can help to lead social change. Conflict theory is most commonly associated with Marxism and positivist perspectives, but may also be associated with critical race theory (CRT). CRT is a tool through which scholars and researchers can outline, reveal, and tackle certain problems because it offers a way to understand how superficial race-neutral structures and processes are ways of forming the boundaries of racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate; 1995; Singer, 2005; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT suggests that power structures are based on White privilege and that certain freedoms Whites revel in can perpetuate the marginalization of people of color. CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2014). The CRT concepts directing this study are color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003), Black masculinity (Collins, 2004; Cooper, 2005; Ferber, 2007; Hooks, 1998; Leonard & King, 2010), bipolar depictions (Collins, 2004; Cooper, 2005; Ferber, 2007; Leonard & King, 2010), commodification (Andrews, King, & Leonard, 2011), and intersectionality (Leonard, 2004).

Color-blind racism is a common manifestation of the new racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003; Buffington & Fraley, 2011; Teaching Tolerance, 2014; Williams, 2011). Color-blindness can be defined as “the mere recognition of someone’s race as racism” (Cooper, 2005, p. 885). The purpose of color-blindness is to ignore racial differences in an effort to develop social homogeneity. In daily life, color-blindness asserts that everyone should behave according to hegemonic standards of conduct, or “white norms as the model for everyone’s behavior” (Cooper, 2005, p. 885), regardless of racial difference. Color-blind discourses assert that we live in a postracial culture, thus everyone should receive equal treatment regardless of race. Further a color-blind line of reasoning argues that if a Black person is struggling with a social problem, then the problem was caused by individual choices and behaviors of that person or the culture in which the individual was raised and socialized. Race talk is a direct color-blind strategy. Race talk refers to public conversations generated around race and race-related issues that avoid direct references to race in favor of coded signals (Buffington & Fraley, 2011; Cole, 1996; Wheelock & Hartman, 2000). One of the distinctive threads of color-blind frames that are used to guide conversations about race is cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) or the view there are cultural deficiencies within people of color (Leonard, 2004).

Another strategy to explore power relations, or conflict, among classes is via hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity originates cultural hegemony theory and analyzes power relations or how a group claims and sustains a dominant position in society (Connell, 2005). Black masculinity intersects with CRT and allows for a more vigorous critical analysis of how the social constructs of gender, race, and sports influence power relations (Leonard, 2004; Ferber, 2007; Leonard & King,
One White supremacist patriarchal (WSP) view of Black masculinity posits Black men as belonging to one of two categories: Good Black Men or Bad Black Men (Collins, 2004; Cooper, 2005; Ferber, 2007; Leonard, 2004; Leonard & King, 2010). Bipolar depictions of Black males serve the tenets of WSP by dictating acceptable ways for Black men to behave in a White society. Depictions of the Good Black Man encourage viewers to admire and be induced into purchasing products and depictions of the Bad Black Man serve to entertain, sell products, and create consumable news stories. Good Black Men succeeded because they submit to the social codes written by the patriarchy and assimilate into the passive, cautious mold that WSP dictates. Alternatively, Bad Black Men fail because they choose to not assimilate and perform loud, violent, and hypersexual behaviors, which are categorized by the media to fit hegemonic stereotypes about Black masculinity (Collins, 2004; Hooks, 2004a). Bad Black Men must be punished, in the public eye, via discourse about their corrupt culture.

The world of sports benefits from color-blind ideology; in fact, sports discourse is one of the primary “disseminators of colorblind ideology” (Leonard, 2004, p. 288). When race and gender are rendered invisible in media narratives about U.S. sports systems these systems maintain the WSP status quo by engaging in racist practices. By keeping Black men out of positions of influence, via commodification, sport organizations relegate Black males to the role of entertainer while maintaining the WSP and the social stratification of individuals (Collins, 2004; Hooks, 2004b). The commodification of Black bodies has a long history, beginning with slavery in the Americas in the 17th century, and is still in practice through constructing media depictions of Black athletes to be used for entertaining the WSP (Rhoden, 2006). Black males have been very successful in certain sports, but they are rarely found in positions of power and control. Color-blind ideologies ignore the intersections between race, class, and gender (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Cooper, 2005). According to Ferber (2007, p. 20), “Success in the field of athletics does nothing to undermine the historical propensity to reduce Black men to their bodies.” Color-blind ideologies focus on one aspect of a person’s identity, primarily an individual’s social class or status (Cooper, 2005). A singular focus hides how race, gender, and social status, such as an individual’s status as a professional athlete, intersects with activism.

**Methodology**

This study engaged the critical case study approach as described by Flyvbjerg (2006), Yin (2010), and Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011). Case study research is an in-depth exploration of a given issue, event, or system assessed from multiple perspectives. Critical case study research aims to capture a holistic understanding of a particular case and to have that understanding apply to similar cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The purpose of this case study is to understand fan-generated media written about the St. Louis Rams “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” (STRHUDS) controversy and the social construction of ideas about Black athlete activism.

The first step in the data collection was to construct a comprehensive timeline of events related to the STRHUDS. The author conducted a broad Internet search for news articles and fan-generated media content posted proceeding Internet news articles related to the STRHUDS. This search yielded 18 unique articles related to STRHUDS. The second step in the data collection was to determine any additional exclusion and inclusion criteria for article selection. The author decided that articles must include at least 50 fan-generated media comments. This process resulted in a cross section of 10 national, regional, positive, and negative articles produced by sports and nonsports journalists. By examining the sample data, the author was able to construct a timeline of events related to the case. This process also resulted in a sample of N = 1,266 fan-generated media comments for the content analysis.

Content analysis is a methodical, replicable procedure, which uses coding to establish the presence of words, ideas, and themes that exist in bodies of text (Krippendorff, 2012). The data analysis for this project occurred in three phases. For the first phase, the author conducted a
preliminary search of conceptual literature related to Black athletes and activism. The second phase of analysis included reading the media articles and subsequent fan-generated media content at least three times (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The comments were labeled and organized according to a priori categories. A priori codes included color-blindness, bipolar depictions (good Black and bad Black male athletes), commodification, and intersectionality. The third stage of data analysis involved pattern matching as described by Yin (2009) and content analysis as described by Krippendorff (2012). Pattern matching involves using an empirically established pattern to assess for the reemergence of the pattern while investigating case study content. As part of the pattern matching the author used themes that emerged from examining the conceptual literature to analyze how a priori codes, and their subthemes, were constructed by fan-generated media content of the STRHUDS controversy. The codes, and their intersections, were then applied in a deductive examination of the fan-generated media comments.

**St. Louis Rams “hands up, don’t shoot” (STRHUDS) case study**

The STRHUDS controversy centers on the police shooting of Ferguson resident Michael Brown. The racial demography of Ferguson, Missouri, the Ferguson police department, and arrests the Ferguson police made are all meaningful in contextualizing the STRHUDS controversy. Ferguson, Missouri is 29.3% White and 67.4% Black (U.S. Census, 2015). Ferguson only has four nonwhite officers among the 54 officers on its police force (Chalabi, 2015). In Ferguson, Blacks accounted for 93% of arrests (Eligon, 2015). The shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown occurred between 12:01 and 12:03 p.m. on August 9, 2014. The fatal shooting, by then Police Officer Darren Wilson, touched off weeks of unrest (Ellis, Todd, & Karimi, 2014). The unrest continued after a St. Louis County grand jury voted on November 24, 2014, not to indict Wilson (Ellis et al., 2014).

Edward Jones Dome, the Rams football stadium, is 12 miles west of Ferguson. (The team recently moved to Los Angeles.)

On August 20, 2014, the St. Louis Rams offered their practice fields to high school teams affected by the rioting (Wagoner, 2014). On August 19, 2014, the Rams donated over 200 tickets to their preseason game against the Green Bay Packers to three Ferguson-area high school football teams. Then on November 19, 2014, during the pregame of the Rams regular season game contest versus the Oakland Raiders, five Rams players—Jared Cook, Kenny Britt, Tavon Austin, Stedman Bailey, and Chris Givens—executed the “Hand Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture. In addition to the pregame gesture, Rams running back Tre Mason and Britt held their hands up again after Mason’s first quarter 35-yard touchdown reception. Britt thought to act out the demonstration and organized the ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’ symbolism with his four fellow Rams (Associated Press, 2015). Fans, mostly White, also had signs stating “Rams fans know Black lives matter on and off the field” (Zirin, 2014). Britt also wrote on his wrist tape “MyKidsLivesMatter” and “Mike Brown” and published a photo of his wrists on his Twitter feed (Katz, 2014). On another occasion Britt had names of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin written on his cleats (Katz, 2014).

“It’s not one week we’re thinking about it and the next week we’ve forgotten about it. This is going to be an ongoing thing to seek change.’ We talked about the situation, what happened and what was going on around the country. We’re in this, too. We’re not just concentrating on football all day, every day. I don’t want the people in the community to feel like we turned a blind eye to it” (Associated Press, 2014, para 7).

On December 1, 2014, the St. Louis Police Officers Association Police (SLPOA) released the following statement:

The St. Louis Police Officers Association is profoundly disappointed with the members of the St. Louis Rams football team who chose to ignore the mountains of evidence released from the St. Louis County Grand Jury this week and engage in a display that police officers around the nation found tasteless, offensive and inflammatory.
Five members of the Rams entered the field today exhibiting the “hands-up-don’t-shoot” pose that has been adopted by protestors who accused Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson of murdering Michael Brown. The gesture has become synonymous with assertions that Michael Brown was innocent of any wrongdoing and attempting to surrender peacefully when Wilson, according to some now-discredited witnesses, gunned him down in cold blood. (paras. 1 and 2 of the statement)

The SLPOA is calling for the players involved to be disciplined and for the Rams and the NFL to deliver a very public apology. I know that there are those that will say that these players are simply exercising their First Amendment rights. Well I’ve got news for people who think that way, cops have First Amendment rights too, and we plan to exercise ours. I’d remind the NFL and their players that it is not the violent thugs burning down buildings that buy their advertiser’s products. It’s cops and the good people of St. Louis and other NFL towns that do. Somebody needs to throw a flag on this play. If it’s not the NFL and the Rams, then it’ll be cops and their supporters. (SLPOA, 2014)

One website, suggesting a boycott of Rams games, collected 20,000 supporters, and another Boycott the St. Louis Rams Facebook page garnered 12,000 likes in less than 24 hours after the game (Hoft, 2014).

On December 1, 2014, the St. Louis Post Dispatch reported that St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar sent an email to his staff saying the Rams’ chief operating officer called him to apologize. “I received a very nice call this morning from Mr. Kevin Demoff of the St. Louis Rams who wanted to take the opportunity to apologize to our department on behalf of the Rams for the ‘Hands Up’ gesture that some players took the field with yesterday” (Yan, 2014). The St. Louis Rams organization insisted that they did not issue an apology. “We did not apologize,” said Rams spokesman Artis Twyman (Yan, 2014, para 7).

On December 1, 2014, NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy provided a one-sentence email response. “We respect and understand the concerns of all individuals who have expressed views on this tragic situation,” McCarthy said (Farmer, 2014, para 2). The NFL did not discipline the Ferguson Five for their pregame “Hands Up” gesture.

**Findings**

The findings include the frequencies of themes related to the a priori codes. Themes were grouped if they appeared to be related. Preceding each set of themes are some representative qualitative samples of the fan-generated media. The themes were organized under the “Good” and “Bad” Black male themes because of the clear bipolar nature of comments.

**Good Black male athletes**

Themes related to “Good” Black male athletes refer to the idea of the Ferguson Five should follow the WSP status quo and not engage in activism. Four themes directly related to the notion of Good Black male athletes emerged including ignoring evidence contrary to the ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’ theory, dumb jocks, punishment for the Ferguson Five, and rebuffing freedom of speech for the Ferguson Five. Forty-eight percent of fan-generated media content was directly and indirectly consistent with themes describing the Good Black male athlete relative to the SLRHUDS controversy:

**Oldflyer**—The NFL like the NBA has a fairly high percentage of thugs so, as I do with the NBA, I guess the answer is to ignore all of them. Sooner or later they will kill the Golden Goose and have to go to work for a living—or go on welfare.

Twenty-two percent of fan-generated media content included expressions characterizing the Ferguson Five as dumb jocks, thugs, morons, dumb as a box of rocks, hoodlums, morons, woefully ignorant, African American jocks, ignorant fools, uneducated, ill-mannered thugs, and just sperm donors. Fifteen percent of the fan-generated media content was related to the fan’s belief that the Ferguson Five were oblivious because they ignored evidence that indicated Michael Brown did not have his hands up and did not say “don’t shoot” before he was fatally shot.
Color-blindness was evident in depictions of the Ferguson Five as Good Black male athletes in that race was not explicitly mentioned but repeatedly implied. Fewer than one tenth of the comments mentioned race, but more than one-half of the comments related to Bad Blacks mentioned race. Hip-hop football players, gold teeth and dreads, overpaid, beastly, and pimps were some additional expressions used to describe the Ferguson Five. Moreover, some posts even included references to the current president in attempts to underscore the race talk. Here the fan-generated media employed a new racist and color-blind technique referred to a race talk to characterize the Ferguson Five. Race talk embraces the language of class and geography as a way to signify race without explicitly saying it. In particular fan-generated media content included the frequent use of the word “thug.” Thug is becoming used so frequently that some forget, or may not know, that the word means “a brutal assassin or gangster” (Merriam Webster, 2015). None of the Ferguson Five have been arrested for felonies such as murder or some form of organized crime, which are crimes consistent with the term thug.

WilyCoyoteSuperGenius—Rams season ticket holders, most of whom are white, should demand these players be cut or refuse to renew their tickets.

Premier social critic—The players have NO “free speech rights” with respect to the NFL. The first amendment says Congress may make no law abridging the right to free speech, but employers can and do punish employees for speech that brings disgrace onto the employers. Such punishment is legally upheld.

Eille—When I go to a concert and spend my hard earned money to watch that group Rock and Roll my troubles away. I don’t want to hear their rants on political views, I don’t want to see their gestures. Even If I am on the same side of the fence as they are. I feel the same about a game. I am there to be entertained. They are paid to entertain.

Thirteen percent of fan-generated media content suggested that the Rams football employees should be punished. Firing, fining, and/or cutting the Ferguson Five were suggestions provided by fans. Four percent of fan-generated media content included narratives against athletes’ freedom of speech during work hours and underscored the idea that the Ferguson Five should have chosen a more appropriate place or time for their activism. Three percent of fan-generated media content suggested that the Ferguson Five and/or the Rams organization should apologize to the St. Louis police officers.

Consistent with the idea of the Good Black male, fan-generated media included content that supported notions of commodification, containment, and criminalization. First, fans emphasized that they pay for an entertainment service, and by virtue of their investment athletes should not engage in activism during work hours. Second, fans speculated the Ferguson Five should be punished as if they committed a crime or that they should apologize as if there was some type of restorative justice that should result because of their gesture. Third, fans suggested players should not be involved in social issues on company time, which could be viewed as a containment strategy. However, the St. Louis Rams and its athletes participate in 19 charities and community programs (St. Louis Rams, 2015). These charities are one form of advocacy for mainstream issues like gerontology, cancer, prenatal care, diversity and inclusion, education, and catastrophic disease. Another containment strategy was evident in that at least one member of the Ferguson Five received a death threat.

The quantitative results and qualitative samples suggest that when professional athletes engage in activism it is not well received by some fans. Some of the same fans that cheer for the St. Louis Rams football players frequently questioned their intelligence, wanted them fired from their jobs, and were generally unwilling to consider the athletes’ race, gender, and personal experiences as each relates to the “Hands Up” movement. Black professional football employees are viewed differently when they become advocates against issues like excessive police force, as opposed to pursuing team charitable interests, while at work.

**Bad Black male athletes**

The themes for Bad Black male athletes included terms and expressions that supported the Ferguson Five, professional athletes’ activism, or ideas related to the Ferguson Five’s counter-
story. The fans who supported the Ferguson Five and themes related to Bad Black males grasped the impact of the intersectionality of professional athletes and activism and do not favor the status quo. Six themes directly related to the notion of “Bad” Black males emerged including support for the Ferguson Five’s freedom of speech and gesture, recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement, detection of efforts to silence voices, some mention of police profiling/abuse of police power, furthering the football employees’ activism, and past activism by Black athletes. Fifty-two percent of fan-generated media content was consistent with themes directly supporting Bad Black male athletes:

NVGNVG—Kudos to these players for finally being fully engaged in the world they live in. Today’s generation of athletes are such minions of the NFL and their corporate masters. The police in Ferguson find this offensive? Really? Offensive is the continuous abuse of authority these Robocops have displayed in places like Ferguson.

DangerouslyCheesey—I hope everyone on the team does this next week and both teams agree to have the first play of the game be a minute of silence as they stand around together in solidarity after snapping the ball. Now THAT would get some attention.

Eighteen percent of the fan-generated media content included expressions in favor of professional football employees’ freedom of speech, and 4 percent of the fan-generated media content directly expressed favor of the Ferguson Five’s gesture. An additional 4 percent of fan-generated media discussed silencing the voices both movements were intent on projecting. In particular this category of fan-generated media content suggested professional football employees should further their efforts to bring greater attention to extrajudicial killings of Blacks by the police. Another 8 percent of the fan-generated media content noted that other NFL, National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Baseball (MLB) teams should join in the activism surrounding police brutality. One fan-generated media post alerted readers that SLPOA had a Black counterpart—the Ethical Society of Police (ESOP)—and only one majority media outlet talked about the ESOP statement: “We think that their actions were commendable and that they should not be ridiculed, disciplined or punished for taking a stand on this very important issue which is of great concern around the world and especially in the community where these players work” (Molinet, 2014).

jniik23260—I’m glad some pro athletes are taking up the mantle of tommie smith, Muhammad Ali and others in being politically involved, and not following the examples of Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods in being just about the money.

Direct fan-generated media contact explored systemic issues including past athlete activism, the BLM, and abusive policing practices. Relative to the history of activism among professional athletes, 2 percent of the fan-generated media content included references to earlier sports social activism including the 1968 protest in Mexico City and the draft entry protest of Muhammad Ali. Three percent of fan-generated media included content that served as a reminder that the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture was a component of the larger Black Lives Matter Movement. Six percent of fan-generated media content was related to fans expressions about police brutality and abusive policing practices, and another 5 percent of the fan-generated media content spoke to racial profiling:

native101—It’s not about false narratives or spin. It’s about the Straw that Broke the Camel’s Back. Have you thought about asking yourself where all this pent up rage and anger came from to begin with? Or do you think it just spontaneously erupted after one isolated event? Do you think any NFL players may have some experience or knowledge with any of the sentiments being expressed by protestors in St. Louis?

The quote above speaks to fan-generated media content that reflects support for the Ferguson Five because of an understanding of the influence in intersectionality and systemic issues on their activism. Above the fan alludes to the historical component of the counternarrative related to “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture. Next, the fan sarcastically underscores that police brutality and abusive policing are social issues that are not unique to Ferguson. Foremost, the fan introduces the possibility that athletes, in part because of their race and gender, may have experienced situations
that could have led to an extrajudicial homicide. Kenny Britt exemplifies this intersection. Kenny Britt, the Ferguson Five member who thought of and initiated the "Hand Up, Don’t Shoot" demonstration, has a history with law enforcement. Britt experienced 17 traffic stops over a two-year period and expressed he is certain that some of his troubles are the result of being Black. "There’s been times when I’ve been racially profiled and there’s other times when they didn’t (care) whether I was black, white or Spanish. (Fallstrom, 2014). Britt now uses a video recorder if he interfaces with law enforcement (Schrotenboer, 2013). Equally important, fan-generated media that supported Bad Black male athletes reflected an understanding of the role of systemic issues, such as extrajudicial killings, racial profiling, police brutality, and the demography of police departments and cities like Ferguson.

**Implications for professional athletes and activism**

That act will continue to be labeled as a lot of things over the next few days. The most dominant one should be "courageous." (Strauss, 2014, para. 20)

While larger society wants professional athletes to display more civic involvement in social issues, the fundamentals of human behavior and conflict theory seriously prohibits their activism. Americans’, in this case sports fans’, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors about national social issues do not sway because of their love for sports, sports teams, or professional athletes. Views about highly charged social issues, like extrajudicial killings, police brutality, or racial profiling, do not transcend sports. After the final whistle blows there are still “haves” who are trying to protect their interests from the “have-nots.” Besides, professional athletes are well aware that the majority of their lifetime earnings originate, not from contracts with sports teams, but from endorsement deals and future coaching and front office positions. During professional athletes’ playing days, franchises and corporate sponsors want them to keep their societal views, on the most controversial issues, to themselves. With that said, the prospect of professional athletes as advocates and activists is fairly weak, but this case study presents some positive feedback and lessons for Black male athletes with activist aspirations.

No professional football athlete has vigorously advocated for social issues while employed by the NFL. In order for professional athletes to safely engage in activism, while competing, further strategizing and organizing are necessary to provide opportunity, protection, and influence. First, athletes should be advised against engaging in activism during work hours and/or while in their sports uniform. There are no workspaces in America where overt activism is acceptable, especially when the employee works in front of millions of people. A prohibition on activism at work should apply to athlete’s individual interests as well as the charities adopted by their respective NFL franchises. NFL teams, with their conservative causes, are unjust in requiring athletes to be organizational philanthropists. Second, professional athletes should avoid token activism, which might include an in-game gesture such as a name or slogan written on their uniform. Given the frequency, and apparent novelty, of token sports activism these gestures are likely to have a trivial impact at best. Professional athletes must strive to develop their identity as activist outside the workplace.

The Ferguson Five fan-generated media, inductively and deductively, engendered ideas about more secure modes for professional athletes to engage in activism. The STRHUDS controversy suggests that athletes who engage in activism in small groups may have a greater impact. Professional athletes might even consider developing a coalition where several athletes can engage in activism as a group. If there were a galvanized, maybe even nameless, effort, then there might be greater security, and thus participation by athletes across pro teams and sports. Second, education with insight as to how causes are socially constructed and how an issue relates to larger actions and agendas might help athletes develop an extended effort. A significant number of athletes understand the issues, because they have or they are living the issues under concern, but that does not inevitably translate
into the skills to play a profound role in social change. Extrajudicial killings are a controversial and multilayered issue. During Tim Tebow’s brief sojourn in the NFL he was able engage in activism around abortion, another controversial and multilayered issue. Black athlete activists might benefit from studying Tebow’s methods and extrapolating any schooling from the experiences of a White professional athlete activist. Education also includes appraising the relationship between athletes’ and team’s social interests. Activism is a complicated social, organizational, racial, systemic, and political endeavor that requires strategies beyond gestures, Tweets, and tributes on shoes. Another strategy athletes might consider is to add monologues and dialogues before or after their demonstrations because the intersectional variables, unique to each participant, can add validity to his or her reasons for civic involvement. For example, for Jared Cook the Ferguson Five’s activism was something for the people in Ferguson and around the world who were protesting peacefully:

"Think about it; what real role models do we have nowadays? Young men are looking around for guidance and looking for people to look up to, and they have none. So why not be the voice and start here in the community when something so serious is going on 8 miles up the road?" (Wagoner, 2014, para. 9)

One thing is certain—professional athletes can have a demonstrable impact on critical social issues. The veracity with which SLPOA and fans responded to the Ferguson Five is one indicator. The visibility of the Ferguson Five was easily one of the top activism visuals surrounding the Michael Brown shooting. Not only did the majority of fan-generated media support their effort, but also a meaningful number of fans suggested the need for athletes to expand their efforts. Professional athletes have the capacity to reach millions, but in particular they can reach young people, at a time when their social values are taking shape. Athletes do not have to be role models to be activists, but true activism requires carving out an off-the-field identity and building on the lessons learned from the STRHUDS controversy.

Notes

1. Kluwe claims he was subjected to homophobic behavior by team officials and coaches. The team reached a settlement with Kluwe that included a donation to charities that support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender causes.
2. There are 23 Black Lives Matter chapters in the United States, Canada, and Ghana (Segalov, 2015). As of March 2, 2015, at least 700 Black Lives Matter demonstrations had been held worldwide (Robinson, 2015).
4. Per State of Missouri records, in 2013, Ferguson police made 5,384 automobile stops. Of these, 686 were White; 4,632 were Black. Of 611 total vehicles searched, 47 were White; 562 were Black. Of 521 total arrests, 36 were White; 483 were Black. At least one University of Missouri professor/criminologist, Tim Maher (13-year police officer), believes the data should be explained to the public for racial profiling.
5. The Rams traded Mason after the team drafted Todd Gurley.
6. “Now that the evidence is in and Officer Wilson’s account has been verified by physical and ballistic evidence as well as eye-witness testimony, which led the grand jury to conclude that no probable cause existed that Wilson engaged in any wrongdoing, it is unthinkable that hometown athletes would so publicly perpetuate a narrative that has been disproven over-and-over again. All week long, the Rams and the NFL were on the phone with the St. Louis Police Department asking for assurances that the players and the fans would be kept safe from the violent protesters who had rioted, looted, and burned buildings in Ferguson. Our officers have been working 12 hour shifts for over a week, they had days off including Thanksgiving cancelled so that they could defend this community from those on the streets that perpetuate this myth that Michael Brown was executed by a brother police officer and then, as the players and their fans sit safely in their dome under the watchful protection of hundreds of St. Louis’s finest, they take to the turf to call a now-exonerated officer a murderer, that is way out-of-bounds, to put it in football parlance.”
7. St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar went on to say, ‘Mr. Demoff clearly regretted that any members of the Rams’ organization would act in a way that minimized the outstanding work that police officers and departments carry out each and every day” (Brinson, 2014, para 3).
Three additional themes that were responses to the activism of the Ferguson Five emerged, including fans boycotting games, cops boycotting opportunities to work Rams games, and the St. Louis Rams moving back to Los Angeles (which indeed actually happened, but not for reasons directly connected to this controversy). Eleven percent of fan-generated media content endorsed St. Louis police officers boycotting security work for Rams games. Another 3 percent of the fan-generated media content expressed fan beliefs about the right of the St. Louis police officers’ right to freedom of speech on their discontent about the Ferguson Five’s pregame gesture.

The charities and community programs include the American Red Cross, Basket of Hope, Bikes for Kids, CHARACTERplus, Diversity Awareness Partnership, Everyday Heroes, Football Academy, Fuel Up to PLAY 60, Georgia Frontiere Community Quarterback Award, Heat Up St. Louis, Hometown Huddle, and Komen St. Louis Race for the Cure.

A meaningful percentage of the fan-generated media comments spoke to larger issues that possibly prompted the "Hands Up, Don’t Shoot" gesture by the Ferguson Five. Relative to the St. Louis police, the grand jury process, and SLPOA, 4 percent of fan-generated media content spoke to conflicting evidence, the need to move beyond a grand jury, and the necessity of a trial.

One post noted that the Rams’ opponent, the Oakland Raiders, should have joined in the demonstration. Another suggested NFL teams in other cities that had unjustified police shootings, such as the Cleveland Browns, New York Jets and Giants, Detroit Lions, and Cincinnati Bengals, should join in the activism surrounding police brutality. Two fan-generated media posts went one step further with suggestions for activism. One suggested that all the teams show some solidarity and protest the following week, and another indicated that they wanted to see it extended to National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball teams.

The ESP is a union of about 200 black police officers in St. Louis.

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