

She's Got Game: An Exploration of the Athletic, Academic, and Social Experiences of Black
Canadian Female U.S. Athletic Scholarship Recipients

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Sociology
York University
Toronto, Ontario

January 2023

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Abstract

Much has been said about the academic, social, and athletic experiences of Black males, but very little attention has been paid to the ways in which the axis of gender, intersecting with race and class creates very specific experiences. Therefore, using Social Reproduction, Critical Race, and Black Feminist theories, this study explores the specific athletic, educational, and social experiences of Black female basketball athletes from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who have received U.S. athletic scholarships. Drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews with Black Canadian female scholarship recipients, between the ages 25 and 35, this study analyzes how they navigate athletic, academic, and social life to obtain U.S. athletic scholarships.

Firstly, I find that the participants were socialized into the U.S. athletic scholarship pathway through a number of factors including social, familial, peer, and media influences. In addition, scholarship aspirations were also informed by negative schooling experiences and motivations like the avoidance of school debt and heightened athletic possibilities. Secondly, I find that once the participants were immersed in basketball, they relied on informal networks/communities of support to develop and share knowledge about scholarship opportunities to co-create complex and sometimes challenging pathways to American universities. Thirdly, I find that throughout this navigation, the participants endured, navigated, and resisted racial and gender stereotyping, identity projections, and gender and race-based barriers that were distinct from their non-Black female and Black male counterparts. Lastly, I highlight how while all the athletes successfully obtained athletic scholarships to American universities and benefitted from their experiences athletically and socioeconomically, their pathways were often arduous and precarious, rife with numerous drawbacks, risks, and sacrifices. In addition, I found that creating fulfilling and enriching academic and athletic opportunities and experiences was often perceived as unavailable and inaccessible in the Canadian context, resulting in the need for emigration.

Therefore, I argue that it is not that Black youth lack the economic, social, and cultural capital to be successful athletically and academically, but that the rate of exchange for their capital shaped by historical scripts, systemically devalues the abundance of capitals they do possess and reproduces existing inequalities, failing to address the systemic nature of their exclusion.

Dedication
For Johnson C. George

Acknowledgments

The writing of this thesis has been an exciting and rigorous intellectual challenge that has allowed me to grow spiritually, mentally, and emotionally in many ways. I would like to first thank the Almighty God for equipping me with the faith, courage, capacity, and tenacity to undertake this work. As I reflect on the pathways that brought me to this point, I can see how my steps have been ordered and despite all of the ups and downs, I am grateful for the refining power and tremendous personal and spiritual growth that these experiences have brought me.

To the wonderfully dynamic, intelligent, strong, and talented participants, thank you! The sharing of your stories made this research come alive. Your willingness to share your experiences in such candid and critical ways also amplifies the voices of such a dynamic and understudied community. I am humbled and grateful to have met you all and am certain that each and every one of you will continue to exemplify Black excellence. Your accomplishments, bravery, tenacity, hard work, and industriousness are admirable and each one of you is the epitome of #BlackGirlMagic!

Dr. Carl James, thank you for your probing and critical questions. I have learned so very much from you, and I appreciate all of your contributions to my development as a scholar. Thank you! Dr. Karen Robson, thank you for your unwavering support, encouragement, teaching me about work/life balance, and providing opportunities for me to wear many hats. These experiences helped me learn by doing and helped me grow as a scholar. Thanks! Dr. Yuka Nakamura, thank you for always being a listening ear, pushing me to think freely and creatively and question my assumptions, helping me to grow professionally, and always being a source of encouragement. Together, you all were able to pull different things out of me, helping me to become a dextrous scholar. Thank you! A very special thank you to my examining committee members, Drs. Alissa Trotz, Michele Johnson, and Elaine Coburn, who engaged with my work in such deep, thoughtful, encouraging, and critical ways.

Audrey Tokiwa, the queen of it all, thank you for supporting my progress in the department of Sociology. From the minute I received my acceptance letter to the program, no matter what it was or how often I called or emailed, you were always gracious, supportive, and knowledgeable. You were supportive in my challenges and instrumental to my successes in so many ways and for that I am appreciative and grateful. To all of the other professors, both inside and outside of my department, who read my work, supported applications, sat on committees with or for me, or even offered encouraging words of support and advice, you all have helped me to navigate my PhD and do my very best. Your expertise, encouragement, and insight have been invaluable. Thank you! To

all of the professors that I have engaged with who have offered support and encouragement along the way, such as Drs. Mark Goodman and Andrea Davis, thank you for your mentorship, time, and support throughout my studies.

To the YCEC/Jean Augustine family (Dani Kwan-Lafond, Desmond Miller, Selom Chapman Nyaho, Louise Gormley), thanks for all your support and insight throughout the years. I've learned so much from you all and you are all just super dope brilliant folks! To my friends and colleagues (Natasha Henry, Funké Aladejebi, Francesca D'Amico-Cuthbert, Marlene Gaynair, Nicola Dove, Beatrice Bediako, Lydia-Joi Marshall, Janelle Brady, Anthony Briggs, Tsalka Bennett) thanks for your brilliance and being extra sets of eyes, letting me pick your brains, and just being an overall dope intellectual community. Your iron sharpens my iron.

Lastly, a tremendous thank you to my parents, Johnson and Shirley George, who have always been my biggest advocates, cheerleaders, and teachers who selflessly devoted their time, hearts, and minds to support all that I do. From the very beginning, you both supported my intellectual curiosity and provided a family culture of striving for excellence. You both set out a clear blueprint and always walked your talk. Thank you for recognizing my talents, refining me, and pushing me when I couldn't push myself! Thank you for supporting my athletic endeavours, which served as rich experiential knowledge for this project. Your lives and approaches to rearing me were full of wisdom, thoughtfulness, and deep love. Thanks for sharing your vivid lived experiences both in the colonial, pre-independence Lesser Antilles of Caribbean, as well as Canada in the 60s and 70s when you both migrated. That first-hand background and contextual knowledge that you shared set the stage for much of my research and enriched my sense of self, belonging, and pride, helping me to understand whose shoulders I stand on. Love y'all forever and always!

To my dear son, thank you for always being such a kind, brilliant, and wonderful young man. Our endless critical and theoretical debates keep me on my toes, inspire me to keep learning, and your insights help to sharpen my critical lenses. You fill my life with so much fun and joy and you are such an exceptional young man that is wise far beyond your years. You are also one of my greatest teachers and I appreciate all that you do to love and support me. You are such a blessing and I love you like "cook food." Janée and Jayda, extended family including aunts, uncles, cousins in Canada, the U.S., England, Trinidad, the Grenadines and beyond, who were constantly cheering me on and congratulating and supporting me with each milestone and/or challenge that I met, your support has been invaluable and motivating. My village is dope.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In popular media images, we are often inundated with the overrepresentation of Black¹ people in particular sports such as basketball, football, and track and field and they are typically constructed as naturally strong, masculine, muscular, and innately athletic (Carrington, 1998, 2010a, 2010c; Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Lapchick, Bustamante, & Ruiz, 2007; Lapchick, Lecky, & Trigg, 2012; Sailes, 1991, 1998a, 2010; Schultz, 2005). In the Canadian context, these images tend to be heavily African-American, and the available research on the Canadian athletic landscape that focuses on Black Canadian athletes is often limited to the experiences of Black males (see James, 2005; 2012; Wells, 2011).

In the Greater Toronto Area (GTA),² the Black population represents the third largest racialized group after South and East Asians and is predominantly comprised of a Caribbean diaspora (Statistics Canada, 2017). Moreover, Black culture in the GTA is heavily marked by a hybridity that encompasses various Caribbean and/or African cultures, American media influences, African-American culture, and the shared and complex history of being descendants of the subjugated in the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Gilroy, 1993; Litchmore, Safdar, & O'Doherty, 2016; Walcott, 2000, 2003). As a result, Black Canadians, while distinct, share similarities with their African-American counterparts regarding vernacular, cultural influences, popular media references, and social positioning in society. Black Americans and Canadians both experience structural disadvantages in

¹ Within the context of this study, Black refers to the socially constructed and hybrid identities of those belonging to the African diaspora, which includes, but is not limited to, people of African descent in the Americas, Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa (Fanon, 2008; Gilroy, 1993; Smedley, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). People categorized as Black are often distinguished from (racial) others by their tightly curly and sometimes kinky hair, darker skin tone, and rounder, less aquiline features (Fanon, 2008; Gilroy, 1993; Smedley, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

² Greater Toronto Area (GTA) refers to a megalopolis in Ontario, Canada, comprised of the city of Toronto and its surrounding regions, which include Halton, Peel, York, and Durham. Together, these regions create Canada's most populous area (OECD, 2010). Research shows that the GTA is also informally segregated into ethnic enclaves (Hou & Picot, 2003; Hulchanski, 2010).

education, employment, political and media representation and socioeconomic status (Campbell & Kaufman, 2006; Hardaway & McLoyd, 2008; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; MacDougall, 2010).

Historically, Black Americans and Canadians have navigated and resisted these oppressive structures through creating their own institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which are found exclusively in the United States, as well as Africentric Schools, community organizations, and media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television stations, which can be found in both American and Canadian contexts. These methods of resistance circumvent traditional pathways of recognition and socioeconomic ascension, such as formal schooling, to garner socioeconomic success in Black populations.

In both American and Canadian contexts—particularly for Black youth—this circumvention, scramble for success, or *making it*, is often structured through acquiring an athletic scholarship at an American university to play competitive collegiate basketball in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Cole & King, 1998; Gilgunn, 2010; James, 1996, 1998, 2003a, 2005; James, Teclé, & Miller, 2013; Saul & James, 2006). The NCAA is the governing body for the highest level of American collegiate sports (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015d) and is typically perceived as a gateway to professional sport (Beamon & Bell, 2002; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997). As such, an NCAA athletic scholarship can be life-changing, as it is oftentimes perceived as a pathway to a professional athletic career in the NBA or European professional leagues at best, or at the very least, as a ticket to a free education. However, while U.S. athletic scholarship opportunities are largely perceived as superior to available Canadian athletic options, both American and Canadian scholarly research on this pathway to university and phenomenon among Black youth, predominantly examines—and is thus limited to—the experiences of Black male athletes.

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

While much has been said about the academic, social, and athletic experiences of Black males, particularly those pursuing scholarship opportunities at American universities, very little attention has been paid to the ways in which the axis of gender, intersecting with race³ and class, creates very specific experiences for U.S. athletic scholarship hopefuls. Largely absent from the scholarly literature are the experiences of Canadian female athletes who, due to a lack of social and economic support and opportunities, tend to have much lower rates of participation in sports in Canada (Dabovic, 2002, pp. 2-3; James, 2005, pp. 107-133; Ifedi, 2008; Lenskyj, 1986; Young, 1997). Further absent from the research are the specific experiences of Black Canadian female athletes pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships—who, like their male counterparts, are also typically over-represented in particular sports such as basketball (Chappell, 2001, pp. 96–97; Dabovic, 2002, pp. 88–90). While Black Canadian female athletes must also participate in a very competitive and time-consuming athletic process mediated by race, gender, and class, they must do so with significantly less social and economic support and opportunity. Therefore, the few Black Canadian female athletes who succeed in obtaining these scholarship opportunities find themselves in precarious positions, as they must operate within the racialized, gendered, and classed context of competitive sport.

It is within this context that this research analyzes how Black Canadian female athletes operate within the contested space of athletic, academic, and social life. Compared to female athletes, male athletes garner more support from coaches, teachers, peers, and the media, which

³ Within the context of this study, race refers to a social construct in which people with similar phenotypical features are categorized as a biological and socio-political category. While socially constructed, race and the process of racialization have real social, political, psychological, and economic implications due to the ways in which various racial groups are socially ranked as more privileged or disadvantaged than (racial) others through the discriminatory practices of racism (Amin, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gilroy, 1993; Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas, 2008; Smedley, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

enhances their educational and athletic careers and facilitates their higher participation rates among males in sport, thus resulting in their persistent privileged positioning and corresponding social and economic benefits (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Baroffio-Bota & Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; James, 2005). These benefits include more financial, athletic, and social supports, as well as more opportunities and interest at the high school, collegiate, and professional levels (Dabovic, 2002; James, 2005; Lee, 1992; Lenskyj, 1990, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the specific ways in which Black Canadian female basketball athletes from the GTA navigate social, athletic, and academic spaces to obtain U.S. athletic scholarships.

This research examines the complex relationships, contradictions, and implications of the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect to shape these female athletes' experiences, trajectories, and outcomes, elucidating the various pathways they created to American universities. My primary research question is as follows: How do Black Canadian female basketball athletes from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) navigate athletic, educational, and social environments in their pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarship opportunities? My sub-questions include: How do race, gender, and class shape their athletic experiences and aspirations? How do these aspirations shape their educational trajectories?

Contribution to the Scholarship

This research contributes to the scholarship in three key ways: firstly, it extends the literature beyond the current Black male—and often American-focused—collegiate athlete narratives to include the experiences of Black female African and Caribbean diasporans within Canada seeking athletic and educational opportunities at American universities. Accordingly, my research uncovers the specific and complex ways that gender intersects with race, ethnicity, and nationality to create distinct patterns of oppression that act as pull migration factors for Black Canadians. In so doing, this work explores how Black Canadian women think through their identities as racialized women

and athletes. Secondly, my research disrupts and complicates the prevalent and predominantly gendered (or male-centered) constructions of Black competitive athletes as chronically underachieving with poor educational outcomes and limited aspirations beyond athletics. Thirdly and finally, my findings highlight how truly *making it* academically and athletically within Canada is often constructed as requiring Black Canadians' immigration to the U.S. This suggests a current lack of space and infrastructure to nurture Black potential and academic and athletic excellence within the Canadian context and the belief that the American context has superior economic, educational, and athletic opportunities.

Theoretical Frameworks

This qualitative study is grounded in social constructivist epistemological and ontological perspectives. Epistemology refers to what counts as knowledge, while ontology questions the nature of reality (Creswell, 2012). This approach assumes that "multiple realities are constructed through lived experiences and interactions, creating a co-constructed reality between the researcher and the researched" (Ibid., p. 36). Therefore, the athletes in this study are assumed to embody multiple identities and experiences that shape their realities and thinking about their engagement with competitive sport.

As conceptual frames, I invoke Social Reproduction, Critical Race (CRT), and Black Feminist Theories. These frameworks validate marginalized knowledges by underscoring and studying the importance of social context, structures, and oppression by constructing reality as based on power and identity struggles related to the real social, political and psychological consequences and experiences of varying intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, as well as historical and institutional factors (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2002; Delgado, 2001, pp. 5-7; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; West, 1993). Together, these conceptual frames create space for the exploration

of the complexities of how and why Black Canadian female athletes in the GTA pursue U.S. athletic scholarships.

Social Reproduction Theory and the Axis of Class

Social reproduction is a theoretical approach rooted in the work of Marx, Gramsci, Bourdieu, and others to elucidate how social structures and discourses—and thus, cultural standards and social positioning within the social strata—are reproduced and maintained throughout generations (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles, 1977; Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne Groves, 2005; Doob, 2015; Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1972; Marx, 2004; Walford, 1986). Within sport, many scholars assert that who plays (or consumes) which sport is largely informed by class. Class analysis is often employed using Marxist approaches that use historical materialism to assert that social relations are determined by economic activities (Rigaeur, 2009). These social relations incite alienation, making autonomous actions short-lived, rare, and precarious, suggesting that sport has always been political and greatly informed by class (Ibid.). For example, one may choose to play basketball over tennis because the cost of tennis lessons, equipment, gear, and tournaments may be too exorbitant, while basketball appears to simply require a ball and, perhaps, fees to play on competitive teams. This understanding suggests that sport participation and access are often mediated and shaped by socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, an examination of the economic realm, which is best captured by Marxist approaches, is essential to the analysis of sport in order to understand the science of capitalism, its functions, complex transformations and, therefore, individuals' class experiences (Bairner, 2007). Some Marxist extensions include Gramscian and Bourdieusian analyses. While Marxism focuses on the mechanics of capitalism and its effects on the masses, Gramscian approaches add a cultural component to class analysis, contesting earlier Marxist ideas of people as merely passive receptors (Hargreaves & McDonald, 2009). The focus here is ideological, through the idea of hegemony,

which suggests that ideological social control through culture reinforces and perpetuates oppressions and inequalities. Gramscian approaches make clear how power operates not only at the economic level, but also at the cultural and ideological levels, meaning that, at any given time, sport can act as a site of contestation, which is neither fully structured nor autonomous. In other words, while class matters when it comes to sport, class location is also greatly informed and shaped by culture and ideology.

Bourdieu (1986) enriches and deepens the class analysis of sport by making clear how class groups operate through his concepts of (cultural⁴, social,⁵ and economic⁶) capital, which are forms of social currency that agents acquire or inherit throughout their life course and that mark those agents as belonging to a particular class, thereby shaping their opportunities, epistemologies, and ontologies. Due to these various and intersecting forms and levels of capital, class groups develop distinctions (predispositions) that shape the boundaries of their worlds due to supply and demand and, in sport, which sports are accessible and/or appropriate to play (Bourdieu, 1991). This is mediated by the fact that sport is not a self-contained universe and, accordingly, operates within a universe of practices and consumptions structured and constituted in a larger system (societal). This means that the capital that marks bodies as belonging to a particular social class also dictates which spaces members of particular social classes occupy. Like Gramscian approaches, economic analysis is still at the root, but is expanded to include how economics also inform the social, ideological,

⁴ Cultural capital refers to the non-financial elements such as education, knowledge and social skills, including the awareness and ability to comfortably navigate within the dominant ideology (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 47–48). Cultural capital is passively acquired through kinship networks, attitudes, and creates a sense of what is considered normal or common sense.

⁵ Social capital refers to informal networks of support and influence that privilege some and exclude others. These networks require time and effort to cultivate and those with higher levels of economic and other forms of capital may more easily develop them, as their social status may allow them more time, access, space, and the skills to build key relationships (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 52).

⁶ Economic capital refers to the most liquid form of capital and is intrinsically linked to money, property rights (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 46–47), and, by extension, social power.

and, thus, behavioural components of a group, thereby suggesting that class also has a social reproductive function.

Gintis and Bowles (2011) assert that the key place where this social reproduction occurs is through formal schooling, which the bourgeoisie use to produce dispositions in students that reflect the needs of the capitalist system, asserting that formal schooling can be understood as creating and perpetuating a particular habitus. Here, habitus refers to a set of shared dispositions and conventions that support the establishment of particular epistemologies and ontologies through specifically defined norms of communication (Bourdieu, 1977). These norms are shaped by structures that seemingly and spontaneously perpetuate and invoke ideologies, practices, and dispositions that reflect specific worldviews; thus, habitus always reproduces particular outcomes, and the individuals involved are ensured to have 'genesis amnesia,' which obscures the origins of ideas and practices (Bourdieu, 1977). In other words, society is structured in a way that individuals are taught to adopt particular ways of seeing themselves and others by adopting particular attitudes, interests, rationales, and values. This lens then shapes their lives in powerful ways, as it dictates what they are attracted to (tastes), their political orientation, and therefore, how they respond to inequality.

Theoretically speaking, the habitus reinforced in schooling reflects the interests of the dominant class in society; therefore, the masses will think in ways that are often in direct opposition with their best interest. While Bourdieu (2011) argues that people can exercise agency, he points to the fact that these ideologies are so deeply embedded, complex, and intersecting that many have difficulty tracing their roots. As a result, this lens becomes *doxa*, hegemonic, or what is taken for granted in society. Doxa shapes the boundaries of society and what is deemed to be *normal*; anything that diverges from that norm is then considered deviant. Pyke (2010) argues that hegemony works at the ideological level through the dominant group by controlling the construction of reality through the production of ideologies and knowledges that make common sense appear to be in your

best interest. These ideologies and knowledges are further propagated through the discourses of multiculturalism, Whiteness,⁷ meritocracy, and the positionality of Blackness, all of which reflect the historical, political, and social structures that normalize particular ideas about society, shaping the contours of the habitus and, therefore, setting the currency rate of exchange for human capital. This exchange rate for capital intersects with the axis of race in shaping how one accesses and mediates their experiences with sport, while also shaping the context of this interaction between racialized people and sport.

In shaping the context where racialized people engage with sport in specific ways, we must first understand the ways in which hegemonic discourses such as multiculturalism, meritocracy, and Whiteness shape the context in which racial discourses percolate. Within the Canadian context, multiculturalism is an official federal policy, set in motion in 1971 by then Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, in an attempt to create a society based not on nationality, but rather on a “polyethnic pluralism” (Forbes, 2007, p. 34). This approach to accommodating diversity followed the adoption, back in 1969, of the *Official Languages Act* that made English and French the two official languages of Canada and gave both equal standing, which was in part driven by the historical political conflicts between French and British Canada and their ambitions to preserve their respective cultures and languages (Ibid.). In 1982, multiculturalism was included in Section 27 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (embedded in the Canadian constitution) and was later followed by the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988, which marked multiculturalism as an official federal policy and “fundamental characteristic” of Canadian heritage, identity, and values (Government of Canada, 1988). Its mandate focused on equal treatment and protection under the law for all citizens,

⁷ In this study, Whiteness refers to those who are socially constructed as belonging to the European diaspora. People categorized as White are often distinguished from [racial] others by their silky, straighter hair, aquiline features, and fair skin (Harris, 1993; Rohrleitner & Ryan, 2013, p. 44). Whiteness, which is often perceived in the Western world as the basis of most social norms and institutions, is an extension of Eurocentrism and can often be a socially and ideologically privileged identity (Amin, 1989; DiAngelo, 2011; Harris, 1993; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Lund & Carr, 2015; Mahoney, 1997; Warren, 2001, 2003; Wildman, 1996).

equitable access to institutions, eradication of structural barriers, freedom to practice one's cultural heritage and preserve languages outside of Canada's official ones, as well as the overall commitment to recognizing and promoting understanding that "reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canada" (Government of Canada, 1988).

However, critiques of multiculturalism purport that it creates a society whereby difference is constructed as something others bring to the nation and can have, as it tolerates, welcomes, integrates, and manages "others" (Henry, 2012). "Others" are created by discourses that mark difference as non-Whiteness and position others as insider-outsiders, regardless of their citizenship status, which tends to homogenize people of colour and exclude them from the full rights and benefits of citizenship and belonging (Bannerji, 2000). This otherness is also constructed through the ways in which non-White Canadians are identified and measured in official Canadian statistics as visible minorities (Jones, 2000; Li, 2003). Therefore, multiculturalism is an exercise in positioning, because it ascribes value and meaning to those categorized as White and those categorized as non-White (Bhattacharyya, Gabriel, & Small, 2002). In the Canadian context, multiculturalism is often used to present Canada as a colour-blind, post-racial utopia in comparison to the United States, which many Canadian scholars refute (see Fleras & Elliott, 1999; James, 2003b; Joseph, Darnell, & Nakamura, 2012a, p. 2; Li, 1999; Lund & Carr, 2015; MacDougall, 2010; Thobani, 2007; Walcott, 2000, 2003). Through this constant naming, marking, identifying, hyphenating, and celebrating the differences of visible minorities, Whiteness as a social grouping and ideology becomes cemented as dominant and normative; subversively, both people of colour and the dominant group internalize and perpetuate this standard.

Whiteness is a historical, political, dynamic, relational, and embodied epistemological positioning and tool of oppression that defines itself in relation to [racial] others by elevating Whiteness and the cultural capital that is ascribed to it (Bhattacharyya et al., 2002). For example,

Harris (1993) argues that, historically, the law ensured that Whiteness became an expected privilege, providing public and private social benefits that legitimize the right to particular dispositions and the right to exclude. In education, Whiteness is often constructed and tacitly understood as normal and natural, tempering the other categories it intersects with and privileging those in close proximity to its ideal, to the extent that smartness and intellectual superiority are often ascribed to Whiteness as intrinsic characteristics (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). These problematic logics often endow intellectual supremacy to White students, granting them access to the acquisition of heightened levels of cultural capital (Ibid., p. 2214). Cultural capital is highly profitable, hides privilege, and requires the negotiating of identities because it measures one's level of assimilation and incorporation and because it is acquired through socialization, it also encompasses non-financial elements such as education, knowledge and social skills, and becomes an integral part of one's sensibilities, making them more apt to respond to similar cultural cues (Bourdieu, 1986). High levels of cultural capital also afford the recipient higher levels of autonomy. Therefore, in these ways, Whiteness as a set of logics can also be understood as a form of cultural capital, as it shapes sensibilities and, therefore, dispositions, thus facilitating the accumulation of social and economic capital for those who embody it. Furthermore, Whiteness sets the exchange rate by which all forms of capital will be converted and, just like financial exchange rates, fluctuates based on an array of external and internal factors.

Hence, in practice, these privileges of perceived intelligence and abundance of cultural capital can be exchanged for access to academic enrichment and opportunities to attain social capital, which are the informal networks working to privilege some and exclude others by providing opportunities and support systems (Bourdieu, 1986). These problematic discourses around intelligence also intersect with Whiteness to make the measurement and perceptions of intelligence inherently hierarchical and constructed in ways that reinforce the supremacy of Whiteness, thus

making the construct of smartness false, because it is not based on merit or ability and is therefore, oppressive and in need of reconstruction (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011).

The systems of inclusion and exclusion created by Whiteness are important to deconstruct because Whiteness is always defined through its juxtaposition with Blackness that, by default, is positioned as inferior and homogeneous. Moreover, because Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that success is measured by White heterosexual norms, the human capital that racialized people possess based on their perceived distance from Whiteness is often devalued. One of the ways that this juxtaposition is perpetuated is through discourses of meritocracy. The myth of meritocracy assumes a societal post-racialism that has yet to be achieved, asserting that hard work will always result in rewards in society, regardless of one's social positioning (McNamee & Miller, 2004). It also functions as a mask that contributes to genesis amnesia, by suppressing the realities and histories of non-dominant experiences and, therefore, obscuring the role that institutions play in the transmission of power and privilege, creating the false image that the individual is in full control of their destiny (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Meritocracy also perpetuates the myth that the existing social system works and is equitable—and, if it isn't, it is because of some individual failing. Therefore, meritocracy in concert with Whiteness and multiculturalism contributes to genesis amnesia by becoming *doxa* (or hegemonic) and setting the confines of the habitus.

These ideas about diversity, equality, race, intelligence, and merit all interact and work together to create very particular social environments, shaping the context within which racialized bodies interact with sport, suggesting that sport is never neutral, and that race also plays an integral role in shaping the experiences of racialized athletes. Therefore, a social reproduction analytical approach highlights the following: firstly, how class shapes sport access and choice and often intersects with various forms of capital (social, economic, and cultural). Secondly, class analysis through a social reproduction lens expands the understanding of sport as something beyond an

entertaining pastime and uncovers the ways in which sport can reflect the social, political, and economic climate of society. However, it is also important to note that much of the scholarly literature is underpinned with hegemonic discourses that can be dogmatic and economically determinist, thus obscuring the ways in which individuals can practice autonomy. While it is clear that structural analyses of common discourses shape society, they are not always determinative.

Furthermore, while the aforementioned examination makes links between social reproduction frames and race, many of the foundational texts fail to grapple with the effects of racialization. Yosso (2005) endeavours to address this gap through her creation of the concept of “community cultural wealth,” which challenges Bourdieusian notions of economic, cultural, and social capital whose valuation is predicated upon the accumulation of knowledges, networks, and wealth valued by dominant and privileged groups in society and acquired through schooling and familial influence. Since the standard is set by the dominant group, when these notions of human capital intersect with race, the rate of exchange for racialized communities is often poor, with the capital they do possess—which is often different from that of the dominant group—being devalued, ignored, or excluded. To bridge this gap, Yosso (2005) creates six additional categories: aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational forms of capital, which recognize the capital possessed by historically marginalized and racialized groups. While these categories of capital will frame the analysis of this research, I will also combine Social Reproduction with Critical Race Theory to further highlight the ways in which race intersects with class to produce differential experiences and opportunities for resistance and autonomy.

Critical Race Theory and the Axis of Race

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that positions the social construction of race as a central site of oppression, which is hegemonic and tightly woven into the fabric of society, and draws on the specific counternarratives of racialized people as valuable forms of

knowledge which shed light on suppressed experiences and realities (Delgado, 2001; Roithmayr, 1999). In addition, CRT identifies and highlights how Whiteness operates as an ideological and hegemonic framework that centers Western, White norms as standard, which informs where racialized groups are positioned in the social strata (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Moreover, CRT critiques liberalist approaches to racial inequalities such as colorblindness, meritocracy, incrementalism, and multiculturalism, all of which obscure how social structures, in their design and function, work to promote tokenism (symbolic inclusion of the racialized) and reproduce racial inequalities, rather than engage in structural redress (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996; Delgado, 2001; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Furthermore, CRT scaffolds for the uncovering of the intersecting forms of oppression that Black women face by elucidating the complex relationships at the structural and ideological levels when other axes of oppression like gender, intersect with race (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado, 2001; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Therefore, in these ways, CRT is a radical framework, as it seeks to address issues at their root by unpacking the mechanics of how racial inequalities are reproduced within social structures like schooling and competitive sport, to create unique, yet marginalizing experiences among racialized people.

Race is a social construct that has very real consequences and is often at the root of differential treatment. Within sport, CRT examines racial power dynamics like how and why Black players tend to be pervasive in particular sports like basketball, football, and track and field, while being heavily excluded from administration and management. This highlights the relationship between race and other forms of oppression like capital, labour, and gender, stressing how Whiteness and White privilege function as sources of oppression within institutions and structures in subversive ways (Hylton, 2010). For example, in an ethnographic study of teachers trained in diversity and teaching in multiracial schools, Vaught (2008) found that White privilege functioned

as a form of oppression and was justified through individualism. Many of the teachers who were White held inherent biases towards students, which were exercised through the right to determine meaning, obliviousness to racial dynamics, and denial of White privilege, followed by an individualizing of the oppression. The right to determine meaning is an example of how Whiteness can be ideologically and epistemologically potent and due to historical colonial practices. Western White ways of knowing become hegemonic, as they are understood as the norm and the standard by which all is measured. Simply put, the teachers in the study defined racism as a problem that was overt, enacted by individual actors and, because their schools had more racialized students than White students, racism could not be occurring at the hands of White teachers. Here, through the epistemological dominance afforded by Whiteness, the teachers dictated and constructed the contours of what counts as racism and what does not, despite assertions from those actually experiencing racial oppression. As a lens, CRT functions here to elucidate the ways in which Whiteness as the centre, obscures systemic oppression by individualizing it. This means that the diversity training that teaches teachers about White privilege is considered a sufficient intervention, as the existence of structural racism is simply denied in favour of a construction of racism as an individual pathology. In these ways, Whiteness affords the teachers the privilege of defining what counts as racial oppression.

White privilege is also reinforced in this process because the change needed to overcome racism becomes a superficial and individual intervention, rather than a systemic transformation (Vaught, 2008), which then goes on to shape ontology (reality). In the privilege of shaping reality, through defining what counts as racism, Whiteness also creates a social reality that purports that race is not an issue, because the epistemology (i.e., source of knowledge) is shaped by White privilege. The awareness promoted in teacher diversity training does not lead to empathy or real change, because the teachers distance themselves from race and racism through denial, and this

denial and blame-shifting is what obscures institutional practices that perpetuate racism, through an obliviousness that Whiteness is a position that is often determinative and powerful over oppressed groups (Vaught, 2010, p.101). Furthermore, CRT makes visible the invisibility and complexity of how Whiteness and White privilege function by asserting that race and racism are ever-present features in society that are often epistemologically and ontologically exercised and reproduced through Whiteness and White privilege and must be examined at the structural level in order to challenge racism. In applying this lens, a CRT analysis suggests that who plays what and how is shaped by the epistemological and ontological definitions constructed and perpetuated by the dominant group.

Considering that race is a social construct, which creates structural problems, like class, these structural inequalities and inequities are culturally and socially reinforced through media and social experiences. Race matters simply because, historically, it has mattered for at least the past four centuries and these racial understandings shape the lives of racialized athletes, and which sports they have access to and can excel in. Therefore, in order to better understand the role of race in sport, we must understand that race and its oppression are historical and can be located through the early history of Black athletes. According to Miller (1998), ideas about racial essentialism that suggest that Black bodies naturally have innate differences and physical prowess that make them athletically superior have existed since as early as Greek antiquity, but only gained traction with Aristotle's ideas about the justification of slavery for particular groups. The belief was that Black people had short-term, rather than long-term, strength, and the strength was contingent (i.e., strong when it was opportunistic) (Ibid.). This kind of pseudoscientific analysis continued, probing into the physical differences between White, Asian, and Black bodies including skull shape, arm length, instep of the foot, and so forth, with Africans being ranked as inferior to Whites.

As Black athletes began to excel in sports in the 20th century, these stereotypes transformed because an explanation for their athletic successes was needed. Harris (1997) outlines how Black historical moments influenced the creation of contemporary racial understandings. For example, sport as a way of elevating status was introduced by first-wave Black athletes. Edwards (2016) segmented Black athletes into waves based on their shared sociopolitical contexts⁸. For example, the first wave represents the athletes who operated within an early 20th century context that was fairly hostile towards Black athletes and viewed Black bodies as both intellectually and physically inferior. The athletes included Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens. As first-wave athletes, these men made evident the possibility and legitimacy of a highly successful Black athlete nationally and internationally—although these athletes were better received nationally—and the ways in which sport could afford one with privileges that transcended the racial order of the day.

The first wave collapsed due to the inability to find competitors, although its main avenues were HBCUs, the Negro Leagues, and the international stage. As a first-wave athlete, Jack Johnson was the first Black heavyweight champion of the world in the early 20th century and was afforded special privileges because of his athleticism (Harris, 1997, p. 312). For Whites, Johnson was disliked and incited a need for a great White hope due to the anxiety that Blacks were taking over the sport

⁸ Edwards (2016) defines second-, third-, and fourth-wave athletes. Second-wave athletes represent the post-WWII and pre-civil rights movement era. These athletes operated in a context of racial struggle, celebrating the victory over racism overseas (Germany), while in the United States, being under the yoke of Jim Crow. This context is shaped by the price of admission to the mainstream being “going along to get along” and was also shaped by limited positional access for athletes. At this time, desegregation of locker rooms was on the horizon. The third wave was characterized by the civil rights movement up until the mid-1970s with athletes like Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, Bill Russell, John Carlos, Kirk Flood and O.J. Simpson. While these athletes saw great wealth, economic endorsements, and mainstream visibility, their cost of admission was often a depoliticizing of their identities through compliance and silence about social injustices. If they resisted, as did both John Carlos and Muhammad Ali, they would experience heavy media and public backlash. The fourth wave is characterized by a context of perceived post-racialism through the Obama presidency, social media’s iron grip on society, and normalcy and pervasiveness of highly visible, successful, and wealthy athletes, but also the Black Lives Matter movement, an organization that publicly resists anti-Black racism. Athletes in this era have diverse responses to their social climate, including active resistance or silence/compliance. Representative athletes in this respect include Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, Cam Newton, Serena Williams, among others.

and the increasing pervasion of ideas about Black athletic superiority coupled with intellectual inferiority, especially since Johnson unapologetically enjoyed the privileges afforded to him. On the other hand, for Black communities, he was a uniting factor, inciting an interest in becoming the athletic exception to garner some form of privilege (Harris, 1997). Joe Louis and Jesse Owens in the 1930s were also examples of early successful Black athletes; however, unlike Johnson, they were revered by Whites because they deferred to White expectations of behaviour while representing the idea of American superiority (Ibid.). Reinforced in these narratives of early Black athletes is the idea that, although many professional and collegiate sports remained segregated at that time, athletic success had the *potential* to elevate racialized people to a higher social standing. However, the cost of this elevation was often a mediation of identity, which included deference to White social expectations, which had implications for how the athletes were received by the public.

The notion of Black athletes' possessing certain innate athletic advantages continued to propagate and would often be explained as a re-enactment of the supposed African animalistic and primordial impulse linking Black people with animals (Miller, 1998, p. 130). These bio-determinist assertions about Black bodies regarding athletic ability and intelligence continue to permeate social consciousness and are contemporarily enacted through intelligence (IQ) and standardized testing (Ibid., p. 135). For example, in the late 20th century, the NCAA legislated Propositions 48 and 42, which troubled the use of SAT and ACT score requirements that were often low for Black students. These mandates moved to address poor athlete graduation rates, ushering in the practice of putting athletes in *Mickey Mouse* courses, giving them unearned grades and passes, thus artificially raising the standards for scholarships (Harris, 1997, p. 317). At that point, although Black athletes were being included and even overrepresented in some sports, the relationship between physicality and intelligence remained. Sailes (1998) echoes and furthers Miller's (1998) historical analysis by making clear that the discourse of the historical physical prowess in Black athletes is always intrinsically

linked to a deficiency in intellectual capacity. Presenting a juxtaposition of two archetypes—the *brute* (primitive, reactive, violent, hypersexual, and removed from the intellectual sphere) and the *sambo* (benign, childish, immature, lazy, impulsive, entertaining)—Sailes (1998, pp. 188-189) argues that racial stereotypes concerning Black people, athletics, and intelligence are historical, perpetuated through the media and, therefore, become common-sense (i.e., hegemonic). The result of this historical and systemic thinking is a continued oppression and Black racial essentialism that constructs a fixed social identity of unintelligence coupled with athletic prowess for Black people, which demonstrates that both history and science, like Whiteness, can function as hegemonic forces because they act as the source of knowledge (epistemology) that informs social life (ontology), and, therefore, the lived experiences of Black people.

Racial essentialisms then are historical and become cultural norms that, through various media inform contemporary athletic experiences. Carrington (2010a, 2010b) furthers the arguments of Sailes (1998), Miller (1998), and Harris (1997) by arguing that Black bodies are constructed in such a way that they can only be exceptions or savages, which constrains the possibilities of their identities, while reinforcing the superiority and invisibility of Whiteness. Carrington modernizes Miller's (1998) historical analysis of these racial discourses by asserting that because capitalism has changed, race and the way it operates have also changed, thus highlighting the ways in which race and class intersect. While capitalism has become more deeply entrenched, it has also become more insidious in its pervasion through media and almost every facet of human life. Therefore, because race and class are intrinsically linked, racism has also become less overt, deeply entrenched institutionally, and more pervasive. Carrington (2010b) also asserts that understanding and addressing race are further complicated by additional mediating discourses such as corporatism, multiculturalism, neoliberalism, meritocracy, and colorblindness, all of which function to individualize oppression and obscure its institutionalized nature.

For example, Monty Panesar, a cricketer and Lewis Hamilton, a race car driver, are both racialized athletes in the U.K., who are framed problematically as novelties and caricatures for White laughter because of their divergence from the assigned stereotypes (Carrington, 2010a, p. 158). Panesar is South Asian and Sikh and is juxtaposed with the Asian terrorist archetype, while Hamilton is a light-skinned mixed-race suburban athlete, who is perceived as more palatable and *different* (read assimilated) from other Black athletes. Their appeal and corporate success lie in the fact that they have been politically neutered and are discouraged from frankly discussing race (Carrington, 2010a, p. 160). Therefore, their commercial and financial success, visibility, and fame are contingent upon the conscious or subconscious construction and reification of new and existing racial ideas and dominant scripts that juxtapose racialized bodies as either exceptions [to the racial rule] or beasts. Moreover, at any given time, these athletes can be reduced to the inferior status of *just Black* if they violate the tacit contract of promoting a post-racial image (Carrington, 2010a, p. 163). Therefore, racial discourses can determine how one experiences social life and places limitations on racialized athletes' identities. In this way, proximity to Whiteness matters, because racialized athletes are socially and economically rewarded based on their perceived closeness to corporate (White) and middle-class ideals. These problematic ideals do not leave much room for Black athletes to be autonomous and decide who they want to be. Their identities are tangled up in historical archetypes and scientific racism that reinforce the status quo and limit opportunities based on their levels of compliance with historical and hegemonic scripts.

To summarize, using CRT highlights the following three themes: firstly, racial constructs are historical and are always shifting with other intervening factors like multiculturalism, corporatism, individualism, and so forth, ultimately altering how race is experienced. Many of the racial discourses that are prevalent today are grounded in historical processes, and these historical constructs are informed by Whiteness and White privilege as epistemological and ontological tools

and frames. Secondly, race is hegemonic and shapes and is shaped by the social environment. While there are structural elements shaping how race informs sporting experiences, lived experiences also have an impact. Thirdly, like class disposition, race creates boundaries that have consequences for those who deviate from them. Therefore, race plays a weighty role in determining how Black athletes engage with sport because historical constructs, which directly impact the socioeconomic and political status of racialized bodies, inform access to sport and how that access is mediated and perceived. One of the key limitations within the literature on racial constructs is that, while CRT does scaffold for intersectional analyses in centralizing race, gender and how it operates for Black women to create dynamic processes in its interactions with race can be overlooked. Therefore, I also employ a Black Feminist theoretical framework to capture more of that complexity.

Black Feminist Theory and the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class

Gender analysis is usually employed using feminist and post-modern theoretical approaches. Feminist theorists contend that sport is gendered because it rewards and recruits boys more readily than girls for exhibiting masculine traits, and that the experiences of women have been ignored and marginalized (Birrell, 2009). Therefore, feminist theory is concerned with consciousness raising and is a dynamic, political, and critical practice committed to analyzing and privileging gender as a central category of analysis, using personal experiences as a source of data (Birrell, 2009, p. 62). This theoretical framework focuses on the experiences of men and women and advocates for both access to spaces *and* structural changes that would allow women to construct their own spaces outside of patriarchal ones. Feminist theory also varies in its conceptual frames with common approaches being Marxist, Postmodernism, and Queer Theory. Marxist feminism often encompasses socialist feminism and critiques issues of patriarchy, class, and reproductive labour (Birrell, 2009). Postmodern approaches add complexity to feminism, making relationships clear through the deconstruction of modernist fallacies about unity with subjectivity, asserting that reality eludes

language and insisting that there is a decentered notion of truth (Birrell, 2009). Postmodernist approaches to feminism often focus on the analysis of social organizations, meanings, power, and individual consciousness constructed through language and other forms of representation (Ibid.). Queer theory, which has also emerged as a permutation of postmodernist approaches to feminist theory, heavily draws on Judith Butler's heterosexual matrix (the interrelationship among sex (biological), gender (the script), and sexuality (choice of partner)), arguing that gender is culturally determined rather than "innate," leaning towards androgyny and making sexuality fluid (Ibid.).

However, some critiques of feminist theorizing assert that, in its partiality towards women, it veers into a pseudoscience that lacks objectivity (Birrell, 2009). Others suggest that feminist theorizing isolates gender and is Eurocentric, thus neglecting other axes of power such as race, class, and sexualities, which eventually results in privileging a specific type of woman (namely, White, middle-class, heterosexual) (Ibid.). Black feminism exists as a counter, critical, and intersectional theoretical framework that analyzes the specific experiences of Black women; however, although Black feminism has been present for many generations, it is often obscured and delegitimized in academic spaces (Collins, 2000). Furthermore, while postmodernism uncovers very complex relationships and their power dynamics, some of it can be inaccessible for many and relies on very theoretical and esoteric knowledge that complicates mobilization and resultant activism that the research derived from it can incite.

As such, I employ Black Feminist Theory (BFT) in this study, to add an additional layer of complexity to the aforementioned class and race-focused lenses, privileging the specific experiences of diasporic Black women. This framework recognizes the specific historical, social, and economic oppression of Black women and purports that, due to multi-dimensional oppression that intersects with race, gender, and class, Black women face unique challenges (Collins, 2000) that equip them with a distinctive lens to experience the world. BFT is also a framework that challenges racist,

misogynist, and other oppressive discourses (Wane & Massaquoi, 2007, p. 9) and highlights the diversity of the experiences of Black women, advocating for their self-definition, as well as the analysis, dissemination, and creation of space for their counternarratives. The competitive female athletes in this study disrupt assertions of patriarchy, masculinity, and femininity, and BFT makes space for the critical interrogation of how race and gender identities shape their experiences. Furthermore, this approach explores, problematizes, and centers Black women's positionality to uncover how their experiences are distinct from those of Black men and non-Black women (Collins, 2000, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In so doing, this approach elucidates not only the diversity within racial groups, but also how race operates in different ways when it intersects with other axes of oppression such as gender, providing further insight into the mechanics of how hegemonic structures and dispositions are produced and reproduced.

Therefore, Black Feminist, Critical Race, and Social Reproduction Theories are combined in this study to theoretically inform and enrich this research by, firstly, recognizing and respecting the positionality of the participants located at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Secondly, the joint use of these frameworks underpins this study with the understanding and respect for the key role played by race and gender in shaping the experiences, interpretations, and structures that the participants navigate in their pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships. Thirdly and finally, these approaches allow historically marginalized groups to exercise epistemological and ontological power by highlighting their agency to self-define, tell their own stories, and have them validated and legitimized as knowledge (Wane, 2002).

Outline of the Study

This thesis consists of nine chapters. In Chapter 1, I introduced the topic, discussed the purpose and rationale of the study, its contribution to scholarly research, and the theoretical frameworks that underpin the work. In Chapter 2, I present the review of the literature, where I

explore the themes of sport choice and access in regard to race, class, education, and gender, as well as the mediation of sport through the creation of athletic scholarship pathways to university. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approaches used in this study, including a description of the participants and how temporality and social context will shape the research findings.

Chapters 4-8 consist of combined findings and discussion. In Chapter 4, I explore how the athletes came to choose basketball as their primary sport and learn about scholarship opportunities. Chapter 5 examines the pathways constructed by the participants to obtain U.S. athletic scholarships, their outcomes, and challenges therein. In Chapter 6, I explore how the athletes think about “making it” as competitive athletes, as well as how they perceive benefits and drawbacks of their athletic scholarship pursuits. In Chapters 7 and 8, I explore the intersections of race and gender in shaping their experiences as competitive scholarship athletes. I conclude the study in Chapter 9, discussing the study’s theoretical contributions and suggesting areas for further research.

In each of Chapters 4-8, I present the thematic findings in their entirety, followed by an analysis/discussion section. I organized these chapters in this way for the following reasons: firstly, this study uses an interpretive phenomenological methodological approach (as will be discussed in Chapter 3), which emphasizes taking the experiences of many to develop a rich and textured description of a shared phenomenon (here, pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships as Black Canadian female athletes). Therefore, this study explores the highly complex, somewhat sequential, yet sinuous pathways and processes undertaken by the participants and underscoring the chronicity of these varied athletic pathways in the composite description was essential to adequately outlining the navigational processes crafted. Chronicity was also important to maintain in this study, because the processes undertaken by the participants are multi-layered, building on each other, and as such take on a logical function quality, exemplifying if/and/not/or conditionalities, which make the pathways and processes not absolute. Therefore, a working knowledge of the specificity of the

athletic basketball context, the social conventions within it, and the tacit knowledge that shapes how the participants move through them, is essential to understanding their experiences. Hence, I paid special attention to making clear the fine details, implications, and nuances of each stage of the basketball scholarship pathway(s) and intersectional dynamics therein.

Secondly, keeping in mind my use of both CRT and BFT theoretical frames, it was also imperative to take seriously the use of counternarratives to center the participants' voices. I attempted to do this by clearly demarcating the participants' voices, my voice as a researcher and interpreter, and the scholarly literature, which is in part shaped by the observations of others. With these frameworks in mind, I argue that racialization is often about projecting ideas onto marginalized others and dictating the legitimacy of their voices and experiences based on their proximity to dominant discourses or understandings. By creating these lines of demarcation, I endeavour to shift those power dynamics to make space by first interpreting these counternarratives in their rawness and then, in the discussion section, separately beginning to make linkages to broader discourses. In so doing, I also gesture towards a decolonizing of discourse by normalizing the colloquialisms, Creoles, and English-language varieties used by the participants, all of which articulate their specific ways of seeing and knowing and are informed by their positionality as members of the African and Caribbean diasporas. Therefore, as CRT and BFT paradigms assert, an approach like this scaffolds for the unearthing of the counternarratives of historically marginalized groups in ways that validate and legitimize their experiences and underscore their agency and power to self-define.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I examine how discourses of class, race, and gender shape sport participation in the following areas: 1) sport choice, access, and opportunities; 2) the relationships among competitive sport, perceived intelligence, and education; 3) barriers to sport participation; and 4) the “making it” narrative as a mediation of sport participation.

Choosing and Accessing Sport: At the Intersection of Race, Class, and Education

Sport choice and access are often shaped by numerous factors including race, gender, and class. In the Canadian context, Krebs (2012), James (2011), and James et al. (2013) elucidate the ways in which race and class (cultural capital) can make a difference in not only who plays what, but also in the intensity of participation, where success is located, and how it is measured. Like Vaught (2008), Krebs (2012) refers to how Whiteness is always at the center of shaping these experiences by terming it the “Whitestream,” arguing that nationalism and multiculturalism position hockey as a normative, White, Anglo space, thus reinforcing existing hegemony and stereotypes about others who remain outsiders or exceptions to the rule (p. 88). Like Vaught (2008), Krebs (2012) makes it clear that the dominant group is privileged through the power to shape social and national epistemologies and ontologies and, like Carrington (2010a) and Sables (1998), demonstrates that racialized others are often on the periphery unless they are included as exceptions, leaving racialized people systemically excluded.

Even when racialized groups are the majority in a space, they remain marginalized in other ways. For example, James (2011) argues that Black athletes tend to be overrepresented in basketball in academic institutions (high schools, universities, and colleges), but are often still marginalized, because it is only in athletic space where they receive consistent inclusion and support. In this way, the idea that Black athletes are innately athletically gifted and academically inferior is reinforced because coaches and schools exercise self-interest by ardently supporting their athletic participation

while failing to support them academically at similar levels, causing Black students to gravitate towards sports as a form of inclusion.

James et al. (2013) also suggest that class and cultural capital may be intervening factors. For example, Tecle and Miller were both Black Canadian male basketball athletes interested in pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships, and both were identified as exceptionally bright students early in their formal schooling. They were both put in special programs, sometimes outside of their neighbourhoods for academic enrichment. As a result, their families and teachers supported a more academic focus for students like them, suggesting that the cultural capital of being identified as *bright/gifted* made a difference in how these young Black men experienced schooling. These were students who, due to their intellectual ability, identification, and resultant support, most likely would have made it to university, with or without athletics. They were included in the academic realm of the school because they were identified as intellectually exceptional *while* Black. Moreover, both boys had strong support and familial influences pushing them into academic pathways.

This experience suggests that their early identification as bright may have changed the role that sports played in their lives, because they had other options and support and opportunities within those options. As Wells (2012) suggests that the more cultural capital athletes have, the less sports is pushed as a way “out” and is taken up as optional and leisure. This example demonstrates how race operates fluidly because, while racial constructs exist, they operate differently based on intersections with other axes of power like class or intellectual giftedness. Tecle and Miller experienced sport differently because, when their race intersected with their class and/or cultural capital (label as bright), it afforded them other options and marked them as firmly in the exceptional category. So, while both Tecle and Miller played the sports that Black males are often overrepresented in, the intensity of their participation, as well as their engagement with the sport, was modified. Moreover, their ability to navigate the education system to avoid common pitfalls

such as being identified as having special needs or being streamed out of university, which are common barriers for Black students in the GTA (see Robson, Anisef, Brown, & George, 2016; Robson, Anisef, Newton, & Tecle, 2015; Robson, Anisef, Brown, & Parekh, 2014), were likely subverted by their early identification as gifted, which is also quite rare for Black students in this context (see Parekh et al., 2018).

Therefore, like class disposition, race creates permeable boundaries that shift depending on intervening factors, intersectionality, and one's ability (or inability) to fit into predetermined archetypes. These permeable boundaries also create an affinity or disposition towards specific sports and sporting identities. For example, in a quantitative study, Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, and Bimper (2011) found that African-American male athletes more closely identified with athletic identity and spent more time mentally rehearsing, which was advantageous in sport, but not academically (p. 98). Moreover, most of the Black collegiate athletes attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs), yet made up 50% of the team, valued sports over academics, and had a narrow focus where they were committed to the role of athlete without exploring other possibilities (Harrison et al., 2011; see also Beamon & Bell, 2002).

Black (African-American) male athletes also experienced academic difficulties because they are often less prepared for post-secondary study and have lower graduation rates than their White counterparts (Baker & Hawkins, 2016; Eitzen & Purdy, 1986; Siegel, 1994). Another study found that commercials with Black athletes and cultural references had more influence, identification, and attachment to identity on Black youth than White youth (Wilson & Sparks, 1996), suggesting that racial disposition in sport is informed by cultural hegemony that, in turn, is informed by history, science, media, and personal experiences. For example, the intelligence and physicality discourse follows many Black athletes into the classroom. Arguing that historical discourses of Black physicality coupled with intellectual deficiency continue to permeate and have real-life

consequences, Comeaux (2010) found that, through the problematic use of the language of exceptionality, faculty felt that Black student-athletes did not fully earn their way into the university (p. 404). Conversely, White students were normalized as legitimate and deserving students, suggesting an internalization of the discourses of White intellectual supremacy. Furthermore, Comeaux (2010) found that Black families acted as primary agents by placing more emphasis on sports. Coupled with the lack of academic resources in low-income Black families, the attention, self-esteem, and the possibility for long-term success (professional) is more attractive to Black youth, who are vulnerable to the social forces that overemphasize sports such as media glorification, parents, and overzealous teachers and coaches. These lived experiences have an impact on both Black and White athletes' self-perception, as well as how others (including those in positions of power) perceive and socially rank them.

Therefore, the historical, scientific, media, and the social all work together to inform cultural hegemony and segment the population into groups with specific racial dispositions. These dispositions are not fixed or immovable, as intersectionality and other intervening factors that inform lives can be influential; however, the development of these dispositions at the very least, can shape epistemologies, ontologies, and, therefore, identities.

Sport Choice and Access: The Role of Gender

As already noted, gender also plays an integral role in shaping sport choice and access. Many sports have historically been male-dominated, and women were initially excluded from sport. In the United States, the introduction of Title IX in 1972 fuelled the fight for equal institutional funding and facilities for women's sports in the NCAA (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003) and was key in making women's sport more visible. However, despite these institutional changes, female athletes continue to be measured against Victorian ideals of femininity, which impedes their success and the development of support systems within sport (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). These difficulties are

further complicated when gender intersects with race and class, often creating variable intersectional experiences. While feminist theory sometimes captures some of these complexities, intersectional analyses of gendered athletic experiences that incorporate race and class are still lacking in the scholarly literature. In the remainder of this section, I will examine the common attitudes about female athletes, the origin of these attitudes, the role of sexuality in sport, as well as the intersection race, gender, and class and how these features shape sport access and choice.

In sport, women are frequently perceived as less athletically viable than men. In a study on White middle-class female athletes between the ages of 11 and 14, Cooky and McDonald (2005) found that the girls often internalized the romanticized corporate narrative of girl power that obscures the actual struggles of acquiring sporting opportunities (p.159). While the participants felt that athleticism was a desirable trait, they said that they were not expected to be as skilled as the boys of their age, and provisions were often made to boost scores in their games (Cooky & McDonald, 2005). Moreover, male players were held up as the standard of playing well, and playing like a boy was often celebrated, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Ibid.). Coaches, family members, and media would promote these ideas, resulting in their becoming unquestioned norms and pseudo-scientific biological facts, thus shaping how the girls performed their femininity. For example, many of the girls in Cooky and McDonald's (2005) study felt that separation between boys' and girls' sports was understandable, since girls and boys naturally play at different levels. Many of the girls also felt that being too good of a player and playing too much "like a guy" puts their sexuality or gender identity in question (Ibid.). Furthermore, the participants felt that the playing field for boys and girls was level and that if they worked very hard, they would succeed and if they didn't, it would be because history dictates that it will take time for society to adjust to their presence (Ibid.).

These findings suggest that the participants have internalized heteronormative, hegemonic, and meritocratic ideas about gender. This brand of liberal feminism, which is commonly touted by

athletic corporations, leaves women ill-equipped to interrogate, interpret, and resist Whiteness and gender performance, including the need to prove one's worth and overcome barriers once granted access, which frequently results in apathy (Cooky & McDonald, 2005). This ideological brand of liberal feminism is also shaped by individualistic, patriarchal, and Eurocentric ideals that impede critical analysis of inequality by avoiding the analysis of structures, context, and power dynamics that promote differential outcomes and access (Ibid., p. 172). Accordingly, while the participants can name and describe the differential treatment, they tend to limit their analysis to individual efforts (meritocracy). To critique the structure and the myth of meritocracy would also require a realization of the privilege of Whiteness (p. 173). Therefore, liberalism upholds and reproduces the fictional accounts and foundations of society and meritocracy and, because there is power in being individuals through Whiteness rather than social subjects, gender becomes by default the only marker that can oppress the girls (p. 173).

Cooky and McDonald's (2005) research highlights how race, class, and gender can intersect to privilege and oppress simultaneously. While the participants benefit from their class (middle) and race (White) status, their gender (female) acts as a source of oppression in their lives. Considering that race, gender, and class are all intrinsically linked, liberal feminist ideology is a way of coping with gender inequality while circumventing the need for rigorous analysis that eradicates multiple oppressions. To address gender privilege at the structural level would mean consciously acknowledging and perhaps rescinding class and race privilege. By failing to address structural inequalities that do not oppress the particular individual (in this case, race) keeps gender oppression in place and marginalizes both those who are gendered and those who suffer from other oppressions.

Therefore, who plays which sport is gendered because it can also be shaped by liberal discourses that promote specific ideologies that teach young girls that their womanhood depends on fitting into and performing a Eurocentric, heterosexual, and hegemonic femininity. Accordingly,

while girls can now play sports, the way they participate in athletics is shaped and policed by ideologies like liberal feminism. For example, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) argue that female athletes are attached and detached from their bodies at the same time, as they engage in objectification and titillation for visibility and acceptance under the guise of female empowerment and agency (p. 86). Moreover, many women in Heywood and Dworkin's (2003) study of adult women straddled a very fine line between muscles on a woman being defined as "ugly" or "unnatural" or empowering and inspiring, suggesting that idealized femininity and masculinity were pervasive in both genders and affected identity formation (p. 162). Heywood and Dworkin's (2003) findings mirror those of Cooky and McDonald (2005) who found that the women in the study felt that their being athletic was an impediment to their femininity, which was defined in part by Eurocentric and heteronormative gender ideals. Simply put, these ideals, whether prevalent in young girls or adult women, position men as the center and reinforce women's marginal positioning because their athletic participation is always framed in reference to how they are perceived by the male gaze, meaning that men have the power to define both masculinity and femininity, making clear the power of patriarchy.

According to Messner (2002), these powerful ideologies begin to shape both male and female identities at very early ages and are consistently perpetuated by the media and personal experiences. Messner (2002) argues that heteronormativity and ideological pressure (hegemony) is the source of many gender oppressions and that in order to combat these oppressions, society should look at the symbolic level of traditional gendered practices at early ages and challenge them. For example, Messner (2002) notes that boys and girls in sports are often separated at early ages based on gender and then are treated differently as a result of these divisions. The colours of girls' uniforms (stereotypically feminine colours), their team names (soft rather than aggressive), and the concessions made for them (changing rules to make it easier) socialize female athletes to play sports

in specific ways that reinforce heteronormative gender roles and ideologies that position women in sport as inferior to men (Ibid., pp. 7, 13). Messner (2002) also argues that these early socialization processes result in both genders learning that men are at the center of sport, through ghettoizing women's sport by positioning them as on the periphery, while also encouraging boys to be violent and engage in group-based misogyny, homophobia, and suppression of empathy.

Men are profoundly affected by this early socialization, to the extent that their sense of self is intrinsically linked to their success or failure as athletes. On interviewing 30 male former high school, college, and professional athletes between the ages of 21 and 48, Messner (1992) found that many of the participants were very possessive of their athletic status, demonstrated an intense commitment, and noted that sexism, homophobia, and racism were prevalent in their experiences (p. 7). Moreover, working-class participants clung more tightly to their athletic identities, while homosexual boys saw it as a cover, and middle/upper class boys saw it as a broad opportunity (Ibid., p. 41). Furthermore, the relationships that the men developed in their athletic experiences tended to be romanticized and were sometimes homophobic, sexist and racist, resulting in the development of covert and dysfunctional intimate relationships that construct and reinforce a particular brand of masculinity (Messner, 1992). Messner (1992) concludes that, while sport has many positive aspects, what is needed is a willingness to analyze its problematic features. As Messner (2002) asserts, hegemonic masculinity is socialized into young men, while socializing hegemonic femininity into girls, with cultural capital and other axes of power mediating the experiences. However, what is glaringly apparent in much of the scholarly literature is the way in which femininity and masculinity are premised on Eurocentric social norms. There is very little, if any, mention of the specific ways that Black and other racialized masculinities and femininities are constructed and experienced within sport, differently from dominant groups. While the scholarly literature offers critical analysis

of gender, such analysis tends to be *colourblind*, assuming a universal understanding of femininity and masculinity.

Sexuality

Sexuality also acts as barrier to sport participation and access, as evidenced by how sexuality has been taken up in professional women's sports. While women have become more visible post-Title IX in amateur, collegiate, and professional realms, they still experience differential treatment, and one of the factors marginalizing them is their sexuality. For example, in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), homophobia and the consequential politics of respectability marginalize female players (Banet-Weiser, 1999; 2012; Battenfield, Dzaloshinsky, & Todd, 2007; Knight & Giuliano, 2003; McDonald, 2002). Banet-Weiser (1999) argues that women's entry into professional basketball symbolized their role as saviours from the thugs' of the Black males in the NBA, due to their supposed moral superiority (p. 410). The WNBA has struggled with issues of legitimacy because their play is seen as less exciting, entertaining, or as the "Special Olympics," curbing levels of support and profitability (Banet-Weiser, 1999). The women's game is also structured differently, using a smaller ball, more college style play, and closer 3-point lines, all of which construct the game as one of grace, rather than one of men's ruggedness (Ibid.). Moreover, Banet-Weiser (1999) argues that the WNBA pushes femininity through fashion (e.g., customizing uniforms and modeling athletes) (pp. 112-113), gesturing towards heterosexuality in players through maternity and proving the players' family orientation (pp. 114, 116), and respectability politics, where the players exhibit over-the-top gratefulness for the league (p. 117).

As Cooky and McDonald (2005) argue, women's sport has to be careful to not swing the pendulum too far or risk accusations of lesbianism and public backlash. Respectability politics assert that female basketball athletes must perform heterosexual social norms, which McDonald (2002) echoes in her analysis of the WNBA's discursive practices and interrogation of their normative

understandings. Using a case study approach, McDonald (2002) argues that the WNBA constructs lesbianism as a secret deviance and promotes compulsory heterosexuality (p. 389) through the playing up of the *good White girl* construct (p. 382), which is a domestic woman with nuclear family values, who happens to also be an exceptional player that transfers her morality and modesty onto the court (p. 388). These scholarly analyses suggest that for women, access to sport is contingent on reinforcing stereotypes about women's inferior status, which is achieved by reinforcing hegemonic femininity and deeming all else as deviant and invisible. What is problematic here is that this stance limits the possibilities of what a female athlete can be and, therefore, reinforces hegemonic gender norms. Again, much of this analysis is limited to an observation of class, gender, and sexuality, without much consideration to the specificities that racialized players bring when they intersect with class, gender, and sexuality.

As such, like class and race disposition discussed earlier, gender and sexuality become hegemonic dispositions shaped by social environment and inform the resulting identities. Like Sailes (1998) and Carrington (2010a) in regard to race, gender oppression has a socializing and historical component. Women before Title IX were often not supported or incorporated into sport in meaningful ways, and their exclusion was frequently perpetuated at the level of ideology and cultural hegemony. Like race and class, gender and sexuality oppression operate in subversive ways and, even when women are incorporated (post-Title IX), their participation is controlled and constrained. Furthermore, these socialization processes also have a profound effect on men's identities. Therefore, both men and women are simultaneously resisting and oppressing themselves and each other, and these ideas are perpetuated through personal experiences, historical discourses, social structures, family, coaches, and media representation. In these ways, postmodern sport acts as a producer and reproducer of the cultural present in postmodern society and as a privileged object

of over-consumption (Andrews, 2009). In other words, sport acts as a mirror of our current social environment and shapes experiences and oppressions.

Race Intersecting with Gender and Class: Black Women

As an axis of power, race also further complicates how gender affects access to sport because how racialized and gendered bodies are taken up can be problematic. For example, racialized and gendered bodies are often treated as exceptions or tokens. Following Carrington (2010a), there is a cost to their inclusion that is precarious because, in Fanon's (2008) terms, the Black athlete is never too far from failure. An example of this tokenism is the ways in which Serena Williams' dominance and presence in professional tennis has been virulently resisted. Schultz (2005) argues that, due to her socioeconomic background, muscular physique, race, and construction as sexually deviant, Serena was often constructed as the oppositional other (p. 339). Both Serena and her sister, Venus, did not come from an affluent background and are Black women with strong and muscular bodies. In these ways, the Williams sisters' sense of belonging in the tennis world has been fragile because their socioeconomic status (class) and aesthetic (race) have been taken up problematically. The sisters have also been constructed as an example of diversity, progress, and inclusion in professional tennis, while simultaneously and consistently being marked as other.

For example, in 2002, Serena was heavily criticized for wearing a corporate sponsored outfit that was described as a catsuit. What was problematic about the criticism is that similar outfits on White bodies were praised for their creativity, beauty, and the pushing of boundaries, while on Serena's body, the outfit was cast in a negative light, and she was admonished for exhibiting masculine muscularity (Schultz, 2005, p. 344). In another instance in 2018, when worn to address a personal health challenge, a similar outfit was banned indefinitely from the French Open by the French Tennis Federation president because it was perceived as "going too far" and not respectful of "the game and place" (Ramaswamy, 2018). Moreover, in the 2002 incident, the outfit was

constructed in a very sexual, salacious, and animalistic way (Schultz, 2005, pp. 344–345), gesturing towards the colonial past of linking Africans to animals. This differential treatment suggests that, despite Serena's continued success (ranked No. 1 in the world on numerous occasions) and inclusion in professional tennis, her inclusion is only symbolic because it is contingent on her reinforcing the discourse of post-racial exceptionalism. Because Serena does not conform to that role aesthetically, she is cast, as Carrington (2010a) would call it, *the beast*, which historically marks her as the ever-present other and outsider who deviates too far from the status quo. As Collins (2000) argues, Black women are often expected to be deferent and apologetically obedient in order to be valued. Serena is not deferent to class expectations because of her working-class background. She is not deferent to race expectations of inferiority because she is excelling, dominant, and present. She is also not deferent to gender expectations because her physicality and muscularity are perceived as too masculine to be feminine. For these reasons, her inclusion is only symbolic and tokenistic, because she is merely tolerated, rather than truly accepted and celebrated on her own terms due to her lack of deference.

This superficial inclusion is also noted by Douglas (2005) who argues that how the Williams sisters have been taken up casts them as outsiders. In multiple tournaments between 2001 and 2003, the sisters encountered hostility, disrespect, and intimidation through accusations of fixing matches and the general crowd apathy concerning their dominance in big tournaments. The crowds were sick of seeing the sisters win tournaments and would often jeer them, creating a tense atmosphere that was clearly in favour of their White opponents. This racial marking of space made it clear that the sisters were seen as threatening and taking over White space (Douglas, 2005, p. 268), which resulted in a devaluation of their accomplishments and an exhibition of White

discomfort when Black people enter a predominantly White sociocultural space, explicating the prevalence and subtlety of contemporary racism⁹ (Ibid., p. 275).

This sense of anxiety and discomfort with the Black female athletic bodies of the Williams sisters exhibited by Whites echoes the exclusion experienced by Jack Johnson as discussed by Carrington (2010a) and Walton and Butryn (2006). The authors argue that when Black bodies begin to dominate traditionally White spaces like tennis, boxing (at the time), or long-distance running, a hysteria develops among Whites that attempts to delegitimize their participation and block access to true inclusion through accusations of deviance and a juxtaposition of their bodies with White bodies. These reactions to the Williams sisters can be understood as White fragility, which refers to “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves . . . [including] outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). In this context, the dominance of Serena and Venus in professional tennis is taken up as an invasion of White space, which threatens the perceived equilibrium of historical racial order and results in defensive and protective responses aimed at restoring racial order.

These examples of the Williams’ sisters demonstrate how they were constructed as the antithesis to White femininity through the sexualization and marginalization of their bodies, aesthetics, and success while being treated as outsiders through a lack of belonging and support. However, there is further complexity to how race and gender intersect with sport based on beauty and femininity ideals specific to Black female athletes and based on one’s perceived proximity to European beauty standards. For example, Candace Parker, an African-American professional

⁹ Another example of this kind of dynamic is Surya Bonali, an African figure skater who, during her reign in the 1980s and early 1990s, was also harshly criticized for her perceived distance from the aesthetic norms within figure skating—a strong muscular physique, dark skin, exceptional athleticism (power and strength), and unconventional costumes (Foote, 2003; Hall, 2001; Ross, 2007).

basketball player, was objectified in the media from the time she hit the scene in 2007. Parker is a fair-skinned African-American woman with long, straight hair and a slender, but shapely physique, whose aesthetic fits Black beauty ideals. These ideals are predicated upon Black women's proximity to European beauty ideals (colorism), which can often translate into higher marriage and employment rates, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and overall better life chances.¹⁰ Despite Parker's being very athletically talented and successful, much of the media coverage on her was peppered with sexual objectification, which started to decline only after she married and gave birth (Glock, 2009; Leonard, 2011).

The same can be said for Skylar Diggins, a WNBA player who possesses a similar aesthetic to that of Candace Parker. Many of the media reports cited her as a new reason to watch women's sports or as the sexiest player in women's basketball (Jackson, 2011; Muffit, 2014; O, 2014), thus focusing much less on her actual athletic accomplishments and statistics. For example, one article described her as "a woman with (cl)ass, [she's got a] sense of humour, her body is amazing, and to top it all off, she's into sports – *that's* sex appeal" (O, 2014). Her physical attributes take precedence and her being "into sports" downplays her position as a professional basketball player and is only mentioned as a qualifier for her sex appeal. Skylar Diggins is therefore reduced to her sexuality, sexy photo shoots, social media pictures and videos, and her visibility is predicated on her ability to fit into Black beauty ideals, with the cost being that her athletic skills and success take a back seat.

While the Williams sisters, Parker, and Diggins are all Black female professional athletes, their visibility, experiences, and media representation differ based on their perceived physical beauty, proximity to Black beauty ideals and White femininity, type of sport played, as well as a

¹⁰ See Caldwell, 1991; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001; Collins, 2000; Gómez, 2000; Greenwald & Oppenheim, 1968; Hall, 1995; Harris, 1995; Harrison et al., 2008; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 2002, 2007; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Nuru-Jeter et al., 2009; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987; Patton, 2006; Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Tate, 2007; Udry, Bauman, & Chase, 1971; Weitz, 2001.

host of other factors, including how their bodies are read differently based on their intersection of race and gender. Both sets of women are being marginalized by the same social constructs, but in different ways and these are the kinds of complexities that future research needs to examine. Black women are objectified and marginalized due to their race, class, and gender in sport, but it happens in specific and nuanced ways and needs to be further explored. Perhaps, the dichotomy of “mannish athlete” and “sexy athlete” are controlling images¹¹ for Black women in sports because they reinforce oppressive standards of beauty and one-dimensional, constraining archetypes for Black women which, as Collins (2000) argues, affects relationships with other Black women and Black men due to differential treatment based on aesthetics such as hair texture and skin tone. Even when Black bodies are overrepresented in sports like basketball, they are confined to positions that require or amplify their physicality, be it attractive or not, rather than intellect, thus reinforcing the discourses that they are intellectually deficient.

Black women also deviate from the center and have unique experiences and challenges that differ depending on their level of play (amateur or professional). For example, in contrast to Cooky and McDonald (2005), Mabry and co-authors (2003) found that African-American amateur athletes (young girls) had a stronger self-concept and body image when compared to White girls. The authors found that the Black girls were less concerned about achieving a smaller body size and, while the adolescent girls shared similar views on physical activity, African-American girls tended to have higher self-image and were less focused on losing weight. Accordingly, while Black women identified numerous challenges as sources of oppression, these challenges were not centered primarily around gender. For example, Bruening (2004) indicated that Black female collegiate athletes experienced racism through stereotyping from their coaches. Sellers, Kuperminc, and

¹¹ Controlling images refer to the historically constructed archetypes or stereotypes outlined for Black women that are meant to oppress and limit these women’s agency and self-presentation (Collins, 2000).

Damas (1997) reported that, while Black female student-athletes fared better academically than their Black male counterparts, they often experienced greater academic difficulty and came from poorer backgrounds than their White female student-athlete counterparts. Moreover, since Title IX, while Black female participation in the NCAA has increased by 955%, this surge has been restricted to basketball and track and field (90%) (L. Smith, 2007). While soccer, lacrosse, and rowing are sports that have seen the greatest gains in participation of females overall, the immense time and money investments needed to excel in these sports act as barriers for Black female athletes (Ibid.). Bruening, Pastore, and Armstrong (2008) and Bruening, Armstrong, and Pastore (2005) elaborate by suggesting that affluence, the potential of racial discrimination, media representation, and socializing agents like parents, peers, teachers, and coaches shape sport choice and perceived access to various sports. Other relevant factors include administration, coaches, and the preferential treatment of male athletes and programs. Therefore, the areas that amateur Black female athletes identify as problematic tend to be specific to the intersection of their race, gender, and class.

Regarding the experiences and challenges of professional Black athletes, in the analysis of a composite of the 2006 WNBA and demographic data, Kaba (2012) found that Black women were overrepresented in the sport and made up 67.4% of players, a steady increase over the years. Black women were also on average slightly older, shorter, and less heavy than their White counterparts. Black female athletes also tended to come from specific states such as Tennessee, Texas, Connecticut, Louisiana, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Georgia, and North Carolina, and these states also disproportionally sent Black female athletes to the WNBA in much greater numbers than their White counterparts. Moreover, many Black female players performed well academically, with 99.4% graduating from their post-secondary institutions and gaining at least a bachelor's degree. Finally, 31% of Black women in the WNBA were international players. This composite suggests that

Black women in the WNBA are a highly educated and diverse group originating from specific basketball hotbeds in the United States and internationally.

However, Hanis-Martin (2006) suggest that Black professional female players are vulnerable to objectification by the owners, and that there is antagonism between the players, owners, and coaches. Black female athletes tend to be silenced and treated as commodities by their team owners seeking professional and financial gain. Another area of contention is that, after playing collegiate basketball, many Black female athletes try to transition to leadership positions in the WNBA and other professional leagues or coaching; yet, Borland and Bruening (2010) found that access discrimination, lack of support in athletic departments, and stereotypes act as barriers to head coaching positions. Borland and Bruening's (2010) participants expressed that they could not gain access to the recruiting networks within predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), often having to compete for jobs with White men and women. The participants also posited that stereotypes about their suitability as players, rather than leaders, served as barriers. Although Black women make up over 50% of players in the NCAA, they are not seen as valuable in positions of leadership, as they make up only 10.7% of head coaching positions as compared to 31.9% of White males and 53.7% of White females (NCAA, 2009). This evidence suggests that Black female athletes experience great difficulty in obtaining leadership positions.

Consequently, regardless of whether Black athletes are the majority or minority in a sport, their inclusion is often always precarious and marginalized. Gender at the intersection of class and race marked the Williams sisters as outsiders to the tennis world through their objectification, and the aforementioned scholarly research shows that, even if they played sports that Black bodies are overrepresented in, like basketball, they would simply be marginalized in different and potentially reductive and constraining ways like Parker and Diggins, and at both the professional and amateur levels. Therefore, gender, class, and race intersect to create boundaries that rank bodies in proximity

to the center (White, male, heterosexual, middle class). The ways in which one deviates from this norm intersectionally dictates the various ways in which individuals can be marginalized, because the center is always being protected and preserved at the ideological level through cultural hegemony. Moreover, this marginalization is further complicated by coaches, family, media, and educational institutions, all of which perpetuate hegemonic ideas about sport access and choice that, in turn, influence sporting identities, access, choices, and experiences.

Conclusion

In summary, gender analysis highlights the following ways that gender intersects with other axes of power to inform sport access and choice. Firstly, gender analysis makes clear the ways in which women are perceived as less capable than men. Secondly, gender analysis also highlights the ways in which cultural hegemony marks the center as White, male, heterosexual, and middle class, thereby marginalizing those who deviate from that center. Thirdly, gender analysis highlights the ways in which hegemonic masculinity and femininity are intertwined with Eurocentrism, thus creating various and distinct forms of oppression for racialized athletes. Thirdly and finally, hegemonic masculinity and femininity operate at the ideological level and, beginning at young ages, are reified through media, socialization, and personal experiences. Therefore, gender shapes sport access and sport choice in very structural and ideological ways; yet more research needs to be conducted on the particularities of the intersection of race and gender.

The Mediation of Sport: “Making It” and Hoop Dreams

Competitive sport is often used as a way to ameliorate one’s circumstances. According to many proponents of sport participation, sport fosters psychological and physiological health while teaching athletes an array of social and personal skills (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006; Bailey, 2006; Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011; Kilpatrick, Hebert, & Bartholomew, 2005; Lesyk & Kornspan, 2000; Wankel & Berger, 1990). Many athletes also use sport as an academic motivator

and mechanism to develop strong social relationships (Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Simons, Van Rhee, & Covington, 1999; A. L. Smith, 2003, 2007; Snyder, 1996; Weiss & Smith, 2002). Sport participation can also be engaged with on various levels including leisure, competitive sport within or outside formal schooling, at the collegiate and amateur levels, or professionally. In the American and Canadian contexts, for athletes at the competitive level, the phenomenon of *hoop dreams* is defined as pursuing and getting an athletic scholarship to an American college or university to play in the NCAA. These scholarships can act as a gateway to play in various professional leagues such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the WNBA in the United States, or internationally through the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) or EuroLeague. In the American context, particularly for Black American male athletes, scholars have well-documented the fact that these *hoop dreams* frequently come at a price, as this group often experiences poor educational outcomes, stereotyping, underrepresentation in athletic leadership roles, as well as low odds of actually attaining professional athletic opportunities (Beamon, 2014; Beamon & Bell, 2002; Edwards, 1984; Harper, 2018; Kelly II, Pastore, Hodge, & Seifried, 2015; Lapchick et al., 2012; McNutt, 2002; Rubin, 2016; Sailes, 1996b; Savage & Seebruck, 2016; Seebruck & Savage, 2019; Singer, 2008; Singer & May, 2011; Walker, 2005).

In the Canadian context, there is a dearth of research regarding Canadian youth in pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships. Nevertheless, Wells (2012) makes the case that the media within Canadian sporting circles promote attractive discourses that suggest that U.S. athletic scholarships are a viable means of socioeconomic mobility (pp. 265-66). Quelling this media myth with sobering statistics, Wells (2012) indicates that fewer than 10% of athletes in the United States get athletic

scholarships at all, with even fewer getting money; furthermore, out of 200,000 Division I and II¹² NCAA players, only 4.7% get full scholarships and fewer than 1% are Black. In many ways, these statistics indicate that, as Wells (2012) suggests, these discourses rely on race and class-based social inequalities for their intelligibility. These discourses are most intelligible to racialized athletes and those in poorer classes because the invisibility of Whites and hyper-visibility of others in particular sports affect how student-athletes understand their future possibilities within sport and school systems (Ibid., p. 270). Simply put, how athletes respond to these discourses is directly informed by their socioeconomic, racialized, and gender status, which is contingent on a need for social mobility and an ability to believe in athletics as a realistic avenue for socioeconomic climbing. Moreover, these discourses reify structural inequality because they obscure the need to address the structural, social, and institutional processes that perpetuate class and race-based marginalization (Ibid., p. 266). The *rags to riches* stories are appealing to particular groups of student-athletes precisely because they provide hope to those who may feel that post-secondary education, gainful employment, and social recognition are out of their reach.

James (2011) echoes Wells' (2012) assessment that the media play an integral role in the identity making of student athletes, but approaches his argument from an educational standpoint. While Wells (2012) alludes to the fact that the invisibility of Whiteness and hyper-visibility of others shape identity, James (2011) troubles the problematic nature of the discourses of meritocracy, which falsely assert that hard work guarantees good results. Focusing on Black male youth, James (2011) argues that race and class can act as barriers to receiving the benefits of hard work. For many racialized and working-class athletes, a winning ticket "out" in the form of an athletic scholarship is

¹² Divisions I, II, and III are divisions which segment the athletic programs of post-secondary institutions (in descending order—Division I is more competitive than Division II, and so on) in the NCAA by numerous factors, including the size of their budget and student bodies, number and size of their scholarships, and the level of competition and intensity of play (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

heavily promoted and encouraged, with the most attention and support being given to the hard work on the field or court, rather than in the classroom (James, 2011, pp. 453–454). James (2011) further argues that the distorted discourse of meritocracy promotes hard work in racialized (predominantly Black) and working class students, while having a low return on investment, and the few exceptional cases that do win scholarships are held up as examples that “working hard” (meritocracy) works. However, what is problematic about these discourses is that they obscure the structural inequalities that construct both racialized and working-class youth as perpetual low achievers who are better served working hard physically, rather than intellectually. Moreover, these discourses reinforce the normalcy of White, middle-class youth as intellectual, capable, and the norm, while diminishing the appearance of any need for structural changes.

James (2012) makes the connection between race and class by highlighting the ways in which Black bodies are privileged in particular athletic spaces, which creates expectations (and dispositions) around who is intellectual and who is athletic. Carrington (2010a) suggests that Black people are often constructed as physically and athletically exceptional, yet savage and thus lacking the intellect to properly contain their animalistic strength. Through sport, these 19th-century Darwinian colonial constructions give political and global meanings to Black bodies, by constructing and re-inscribing ideas about their difference. While many believe that sport has a race-neutralizing effect, the stark Whiteness of leadership positions in sport suggests otherwise (Carrington, 2010a, p. 172). Class also plays an integral role in shaping the type of sport Black athletes engage in, as it shapes cultural expectations, prevalence and exposure to athletic role models, financial ability to pay for equipment and membership, as well as the style of play and fostering of a sense of belonging in sport (Bourdieu, 1991; Edwards, 2000; Hoberman, 1997; James, 2012; Saul & James, 2006). As a result, Black athletes are overrepresented in sports such as basketball and track and field (Chappell, 2001; Dabovic, 2002; James, 2005, 2011).

In addition, Black athletic bodies are subject to overt forms of racism, sexualization of their bodies, and reinforcement of dominant racial ideologies concerning Black athleticism and innate Black intellectual inferiority (Carrington, 2010a, p. 173). Black parents also reinforce these myths by fostering a broader anti-intellectual culture by more enthusiastically moving students into sports over educational pursuits, which shapes their self-identification (Carrington, 2010a; James, 2005; Singer & May, 2011). This is also promoted in schools by teachers and coaches who promote Black student athletic participation and their aspirations to achieve athletic scholarships as a signifier of “making it.” The pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships is often time-consuming and an unlikely goal—especially for Canadian athletes—and yet, it remains very pervasive in Black youth sporting cultures and can also hamper the academic achievement of Black students (Christie, 2012; Gilgunn, 2010; James, 1998, 2003a; James et al., 2013; Siegel, 1994; Wells, 2012). Moreover, privileging Black bodies in sports like basketball acts as way of giving Black youth access to recognition, support, and admiration that they tend to lack in academic spaces, while simultaneously reinforcing the discourse that they are intellectually ill-fitting. These discourses are prevalent in both Wells’ (2012) and James’ (2011, 2012) research, as they indicate that, while racialized and working-class athletes can be privileged with social capital in athletic spaces, their conceptualization of university attendance may differ from those in the middle and upper classes. For example, Wells’ (2012) case study found that, while both the upper and working-class groups viewed scholarships as a form of distinction, the working class group was much more focused on the athletic side of attaining an athletic scholarship. The middle- to upper-class students (predominantly White) engaged with sport in a leisurely way, more concerned with the adventure, exclusivity, elitism, and the symbolic capital that gaining a scholarship could bring them (Wells, 2012, pp. 280–281). These are students who would have gone to university regardless of their athletic participation. This case study uncovers the elusive ways that class operates to structure and inform who plays which sport, and why.

Both James (2011, 2012) and Wells (2012) highlight the ways in which class and race frequently intersect; Wells' (2012) case study shows that, for the working-class students, the scholarships are more about social mobility, while, for the upper classes, they represent adventure and exploration, which speaks to the stake and, therefore, the approach that these different class groups may take. Simply put, class provides options that shape how athletes take up sports. Those who have other options and are going to university anyway have the privilege of playing out of desire and pleasure, rather than *need*, making the experience and level of commitment different among classes and, in some cases, racial groups. James (2011, 2012) and Wells (2012) also highlight the ways in which the axes of power, such as race and class, often intersect and must be understood in relation to each other because sport is reflective of the larger society. White middle-class athletes tend to occupy the center, while working-class racialized athletes are often positioned on the periphery, meaning that while class dictates who plays what, race intersects with class to also inform sport choices and access based on media and societal discourses and the way they are reinforced and ingested differently based on one's intersectional location. The analyses of James (2011, 2012), Wells (2012), and others also highlight the complexity of the role of class through the incorporation of Gramscian and Bourdieusian thought to highlight the role of media in shaping cultural hegemony, thereby informing the dispositions of various groups along class and racial lines. These analyses suggest that class is an ever-present factor that shapes access to sport, one's perception of the world, as well as views on the possibilities that sport can present for their lives.

Conclusion

The scholarly literature reviewed in this chapter indicates that the social, educational, and athletic experiences of athletes, including access to sport and who plays what and why, are shaped by a host of intersecting and complex factors such as race, gender, and class, on the one hand, and media, social experiences, and historical structures and discourses, on the other hand. These factors

shape the ways in which athletes interact with sport and the specific ways in which they may or may not be marginalized. Therefore, sport is much more than a beloved pastime or equalizer, as it acts upon historical and hegemonic scripts to reproduce current power relations and historical narratives. Class shapes access, dispositions, attitudes, and the ability for an athlete to thrive in a sport. When intersecting with race, historical and colonial scripts can act as barriers to constrain racialized athletes into roles that objectify them and make their success contingent upon an adherence to existing constructs. In this way, sport does not deracialize or equalize, but instead amplifies existing class, gender, and racial understandings that jointly reinforce the myth that Black people in particular are “creatures of the body and not of the mind” (Carrington, 2010a, p. 174).

When exploring the role of gender, the scholarly literature reveals that athletes and their identities are not only challenged, but also mediated and constrained to fit into patriarchal norms that can shift in their parameters based on intersections with race and class. Therefore, previous research highlights a great complexity regarding how various bodies interact with sport, and how they are perceived when they do, creating a certain specificity based on one’s intersectional identities. However, this complexity of the scholarly literature in this area is often limited to the experiences of American White women and men or Black men at various points of their life course. The Canadian perspectives of athletes are further obscured, with the experiences of Black Canadian female athletes even further absent.

Areas for further research include exploratory and quantitative work that would capture the experiences of Black female athletes in general in all contexts, including those pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships and engaging with an array of sports. More specifically, given its dearth in the scholarly literature, perspectives from those in various parts of the African diaspora, such as Black women in Canadian, Caribbean, and European contexts, as well as the experiences of other racialized female athletes, such as South and East Asian women, are also greatly needed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My primary research question is: How do Black Canadian female basketball players from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), who have been successful in obtaining U.S. athletic scholarships, navigate athletic, educational, and social spaces? My main focus is to understand the essence of how the Black women in this study grapple with the male-centric athletic landscape to achieve visibility in the athletic world and the ways in which their race, gender, and class intersect to affect their social, athletic, and educational experiences, aspirations, trajectories, and outcomes. In other words, did these athletes' intensive competitive engagement with sport help or harm their educational and social opportunities and outcomes and in which ways? How do race, gender, and class help or hinder their athletic pursuits? What challenges and barriers do they face in their pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships because of their race, gender and/or class?

As discussed earlier, hegemonic ideals regarding male leadership and domination in sports permeate popular discourses and understandings of sport (Hargreaves & McDonald, 2009, p. 55). Therefore, it is imperative to explore the lived experiences and structural forces influencing the participation of Black women in sport to reveal more fully the complexities therein. My primary research question and sub-questions shape the parameters of this study and allow for the participants to self-report their complex, intersectional, and specific experiences.

Methodological Approach

This qualitative study uses an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore the experiences of Black Canadian female athletes from the GTA who pursued U.S. athletic scholarships. Broadly speaking, a phenomenological approach provides an understanding of several individuals' lived experiences, enabling the development of "common meaning" and a "composite description of the essence of a phenomenon for all of the individuals" through a thick or textured description (Creswell, 2013, p. 76; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA, which

emerged as an iteration of hermeneutical phenomenology, is idiographic in its concern with particular and contextual experiences that “allow for multiple individuals (participants) who experience similar events, to tell their stories without any distortions and/or prosecutions” (Alase, 2017, p. 11; Smith et al., 2009). In these ways, IPA allows for a deeper analysis and process of data collection (Alase, 2017, p. 12), and, as Smith et al. (2009) argue,

... is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. And it aims to conduct this examination in a way, which as far as possible, enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems. This is what makes IPA phenomenological and connects it to the core ideas unifying phenomenological philosophers. (p. 32)

Therefore, in using IPA as a methodological approach, I sought to unpack the *hoop dreams* phenomenon from the vantage point of Black Canadian female athletes from the GTA. Coupled with Social Reproduction, Critical Race, and Black Feminist Theories, I also sought deep, contextual, and nuanced knowledge about the study participants’ athletic pathways. I was also interested in uncovering how race, gender, and class intersected to shape the participants’ experiences and inform their navigational strategies and outcomes within their pathways, while also uncovering the sources of information they used, and how the information garnered facilitated their scholarship aspirations.

Recruitment and Sampling

In order to find my participants, following IPA, I relied on purposive sampling to facilitate in-depth study, rather than empirical generalizations (Patton, 2001; Smith et al., 2009). By using a specific criterion, participants were appropriately identified so as to illuminate the questions and concepts under study (Patton, 2001; Smith et al., 2009). As such, sampling using this approach enabled me to recruit participants that would provide the most in-depth information (Smith et al., 2009). To find participants, I tapped into networks of basketball communities and former high-level

athletes both on and off-line and distributed flyers seeking participation in the study. Once I identified several participants who properly fit the criteria, using snowball sampling, I asked them to identify other participants that would fit my criteria as well (Browne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). In addition, I contacted potential participants through community-based basketball leagues in the GTA. These leagues not only help to develop female athletes, nurturing their pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships, but also attract former elite and collegiate female basketball athletes.

I found 20 participants with the following key criteria: they were between the ages of 25 and 35 years old, attended a secondary school in the GTA, self-identified as Black, and were successful in obtaining U.S. athletic scholarships. The aforementioned age range of the participants was chosen because I wanted to speak with women who, if successful in their pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships, played competitively in the U.S. for at least two athletic seasons and could speak about their experiences in a reflexive way. It was also important for me that the participants had attended secondary school in Canada, because the pathway for Canadian athletes to the NCAA is distinct from that of American athletes. Canadian athletes usually require participation in several competitive teams outside formal schooling in order to gain exposure to American collegiate scouts, making their athletic career in secondary school in Ontario an essential part of their being recruited for athletic scholarships from American educational institutions. Therefore, all participants shared the experience of pursuing these scholarships from a Canadian perspective, as former high school students of the Ontario formal schooling system.

I also chose not to specify an ethnic or linguistic group of the Black women in this study. This was meant not to homogenize the identities of my participants, but rather to allow for more diversity of the respondents to self-identify and speak about the role and degree to which their cultural and ethno-racial specificity, as they understood it, shaped their thinking about their athletic, social, and academic experiences.

To ascertain whether the initially identified candidates fit the above criteria, all of them were asked to fill out an introductory questionnaire hosted on www.surveymonkey.com (see Appendix B). This questionnaire asked for descriptive information such as age, race, ethnicity, high school attendance in the GTA, U.S. athletic scholarship pursued, and how long they played at the American institution. This questionnaire was used to identify potential participants and their suitability for the study and 20 participants were ultimately selected for the study.

Data collection

The data were collected through the use of semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews (Alase, 2017; Jones & Gratton, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). I chose in-depth individual interviews rather than focus groups because the composition and dynamics of the focus group can influence the quality of data obtained, such as having a dominant and/or influential focus group member (Stewart, Rook, & Shamdasani, 2006), who would then inhibit the disclosure of some participants. Individual interviews countered these kinds of focus group dynamics that inhibit disclosure, allowing for all participants to share their views. Moreover, the information sought from the participants was deep knowledge, which aimed at understanding the complexity of multiple views on a particular shared experience (receiving a U.S. athletic scholarship as a Black Canadian woman), making the intimacy of in-depth interviews appropriate (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

The individual interviews were informal, guided conversations, and my questioning route in the interviews was sequenced and themed to follow a chronological and thematic approach, moving from general to specific questions, and asking positive before negative questions (Krueger & Casey, 2009). My interview questions also took on a life story approach, which aimed to capture deep and contextualized narratives (Atkinson, 2012). Early in the research process, based on the scholarly literature and my own lived experience as a student athlete, I recognized that these athletic processes happen in phases that are highly detailed and intricate; therefore, my line of questioning followed a

chronology of the process. In so doing, my aim was to explore the ways in which intensive sport participation in pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships as Black Canadian women shaped the social, academic, and athletic outcomes and experiences of my participants overall and at particular points in their journeys.

The in-depth individual interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2017 at various locations in the Greater Toronto Area and were recorded using the One Plus Three recording software. Upon the completion of all the interviews, the participants were compensated for their time and participation with a 20-dollar gift card of their choosing.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a modified version of the data analysis spiral, which encourages the researcher to move in immersive analytical circles instead of using a linear approach (Creswell, 2013). This modified data analysis spiral model (Figure 1) incorporated versions of the model as outlined by Creswell (2007, 2013) and Creswell and Poth (2017), as well as elements of the IPA data analysis.

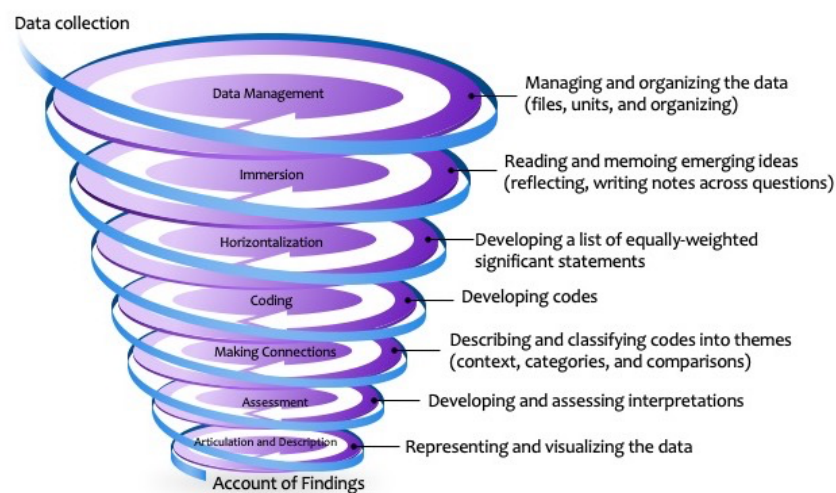


Figure 1. Modified version of Creswell's data analysis spiral. Adapted from Creswell (2007, 2013)

Using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software, I first read through all the transcripts to organize them chronologically to clearly identify the five phases of the athletic scholarship process, as identified by the participants and my own background knowledge. I initially labelled these phases as: 1) Introduction to sport; 2) Talent development; 3) Recruitment; 4) Making it/NCAA; and 5) Retirement. I then immersed myself in the transcripts to get a general sense of the collected data and made notes reflecting on each phase. Next, I examined the transcripts to create codes based on patterns, relationships, and divergences that emerged in the data within each phase, and then engaged in horizontalization by developing a list of significant statements, giving equal weight to each one (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). I then grouped the significant statements within each phase into the codes based on the following types: descriptive, linguistic, conceptual, contextual, and deconstructive (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). This process helped to clarify how each statement contributed to the development of broader themes and codes, as well as facilitated the eventual generation of thick descriptions (Creswell, 2013, p. 193).

Next, in order to elucidate nuances within the sample, I grouped and organized the codes into broader and mostly chronological themes and sub-themes, given the participants' fairly sequential pathways. I then interpreted the data to explain how race, gender, and class shaped the complexities of the athletic, academic, and social experiences of the athletes pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships under study. The data were then represented by creating a composite description that incorporated both structural and textural aspects of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

Validity, Generalizability and Limitations of the Study

This research is exploratory in nature, but is intended to broaden discussions of race, sport, and gender, particularly in the Canadian context. Due to the limited scope of this study and self-

selecting sampling, my findings are not generalizable to wider populations and cannot be assumed to speak to the experiences of all Black Canadian female athletes.

To address these threats to validity, I employed several strategies including triangulation, negative case analysis, rich thick description, and, to some degree, bracketing. Firstly, I used triangulation. Through using multiple theoretical perspectives to underpin this study, I engaged in theoretical triangulation to “extend the possibilities for producing knowledge” (Flick, 2009, p. 444; see also Denzin, 2017b, 2017a). I also employed data triangulation—which includes time, space, and person—to produce diversity within the sample and within the interpretation the participants’ experiences. For example, I used the time form of data triangulation by having the participants “relate to the same phenomenon at different times in order to establish congruence” (Tobin & Begley, 2010, p. 423; see also Denzin, 2017b, 2017a; Flick, 2009). Although the participants were fairly homogenous with regard to experiencing the shared phenomenon under study, racial identity, age range, and athletic and academic attainment, they also had several differences such as outcomes, pathways, and locations on their journeys. Therefore, a key difference to note was that the participants were in different phases of their athletic journeys: while some were completely retired from sport, others were still playing professionally or were coaching, while yet others were in pursuit of professional opportunities. Gathering data from these various sub-groups within the sample could also be considered an example of the person form of data triangulation, because the data were being gathered from different types of participants who “may recall items of information due to interactions within a group that would otherwise be overlooked” (Tobin & Begley, 2010, p. 423). I posit that these interactions that affect information recall can also include the participants’ interaction with their environment based on the phase of the athletic journey that they were in. Flick (2009) notes that, while triangulation was initially developed to counter threats to validity, its use now focuses

more on “further enriching and completing knowledge and towards transgressing the (always limited) epistemological potentials of the individual method” (p. 444).

These triangulation strategies also facilitated my use of negative case analysis to include cases that did not always fit patterns within codes or themes to provide a broader and more “realistic assessment of the phenomenon under study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). The inclusion of negative cases also ultimately supported the development of rich, thick, descriptions that enabled the transferability of the findings to other settings for readers (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). In so doing, I was able to produce a highly detailed, nuanced, and interconnected textural description of the phenomenon under study.

Finally, while I made efforts to bracket myself, it was difficult to completely remove my philosophical assumptions from the data (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). As a departure from phenomenological approaches as described by Moustakas (1994), IPA does not overtly advocate for intentional bracketing and, as an approach with hermeneutical underpinnings, it is largely concerned with accurate interpretation of experiences, thus rendering complete bracketing impossible (Alase, 2017; Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). As such, I contend that my social positioning actually enhanced my ability to collect and interpret these data because, like many of my participants, I identify as a Black woman of Caribbean descent, who is within the same age range as the participants. I am also a former competitive collegiate athlete and coach, with peers who went on to obtain U.S. athletic scholarships. My positionality armed me with an understanding of the athletic world and informed my approaches to this research, enriching my ability to interpret and grapple with the data gathered. Moreover, my positionality provided fluency with basketball networks, pathways, systems, parlance, as well as with broader socio-cultural norms, references, and colloquialisms. As a result, in my role as a researcher, I was able to readily understand and interpret the nuances of the insider knowledge provided by the participants, because I possess

intimate knowledge and familiarity with competitive basketball, its social conventions, and communities from various vantage points.

Ethical Considerations

My study included human participants and, before collecting any data, I obtained informed consent. I briefed my participants on the nature and purpose of the study. I also assured my participants of the confidentiality of their data and my commitment to maintaining their privacy by removing any identifying attributes. Given the intimate and detailed nature of the information shared and the small community of Black Canadian female basketball athletes who studied and played outside of Canada, I chose not to use pseudonyms in presenting the findings. I instead opted to use references such as “participant” or “athlete,” in order to further protect their identities.

The audio data were stored in an encrypted password-protected digital hard drive that was locked away in a safe at the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community, and Diaspora. The audio data of the interviews will be destroyed within six months from the publication of this study; the audio was initially transcribed using pseudonyms.

Description of Participants

The findings reported in this study are based on 20 introductory surveys and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. The participants shared the following characteristics: firstly, all originated from the GTA including the city of Toronto and Peel, Durham, and York regions. Secondly, all participants attended Canadian high schools within Ontario for at least four academic years. Thirdly, all participants successfully obtained athletic scholarships at colleges and universities across the United States, using various methods and pathways to do so. Fourthly, all participants graduated with at least an honours bachelor’s degree in several areas of study (see Figure 2). In addition, 15% of the athletes also went on to obtain graduate degrees.

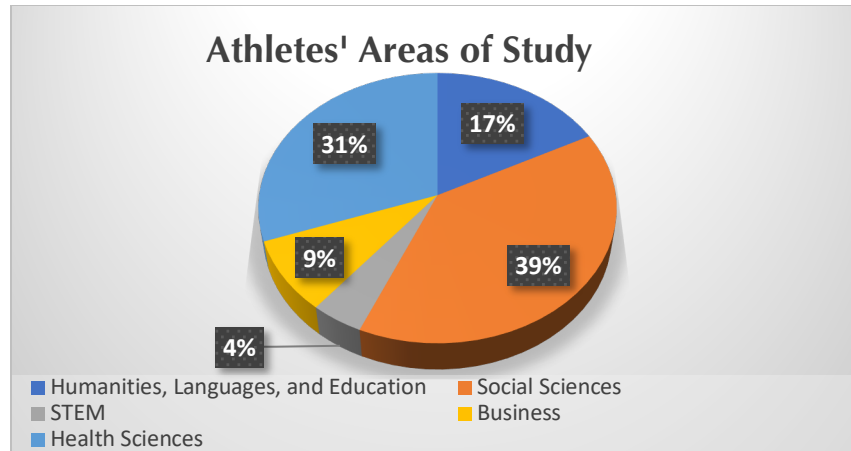


Figure 2. Athletes' areas of study

Finally, at the time of interviewing, 65% of the participants were retired from sport, with 30% actively competing professionally outside of Canada and 5% pursuing professional playing opportunities (see Figure 3). Therefore, the participants were retrospectively thinking through their scholarship aspirations at a particular moment in time.

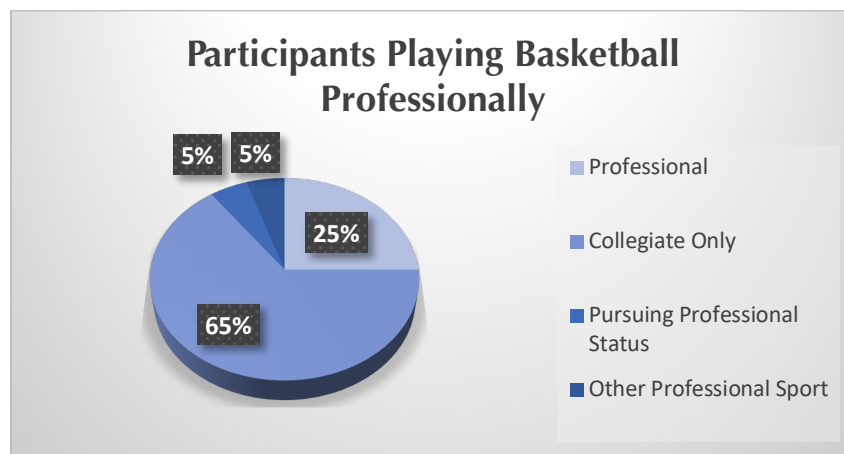


Figure 3. Players currently competing at the professional level

Temporality and Social Context

It is also essential to highlight that the study's findings are greatly informed by the fact that the study participants were within the age range of 25 to 35 years old, which constructs them as millennials. While there is some disagreement about the specific birth years of millennials, they are generally represented as those born between the early 1980s and early 2000s (Blow, 2014;

Garikapati, Pendyala, Morris, Mokhtarian, & McDonald, 2016; Wheeler, 2017). This generation was the first to be thoroughly immersed in digital technology (Au-Yong-Oliveira, Gonçalves, Martins, & Branco, 2018; Calvo-Porràl, Pesqueira-Sanchez, & Faiña Medín, 2018; Serres, 2014; Vogels, 2018), where Internet usage via computers and cellular devices dominates social, professional, and personal life. Older millennials, however, do have some memory of pre-Internet life, which is important to highlight, as their experiences and methods of pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships were shaped by a social context that required more face-to-face interaction and networking, including other forms of communication like phone calls and postal mail, rather than email, to garner information and navigate institutions.

In addition, because this cohort of athletes all attended elementary and secondary school within Ontario, they were also affected by the sweeping policy changes in education that were implemented after 1995, when the Progressive Conservatives under the leadership of Mike Harris, took office. At this time, the Harris Conservative government dismantled the provincial anti-racism secretariat, removing its racial equity-based mandate from the provincial education landscape (Anderson & Jafaar, 2003, 2007; Gidney, 1999). Ontario schools also experienced large cuts to funding, curricular changes, and the elimination of grade 13 or Ontario Academic Credits (OAC) (Gidney, 1999). These swift and numerous changes resulted in multiple labour disruptions, an academic year with a double-cohort of high school graduates from the new and old systems, and school boards suspending extra-curricular activities like sports (Gidney, 1999). These changes to the educational policy context of Ontario are important to note because, at the time of these changes and their resultant labour disruptions, most of the participants were either middle- or high school students, which could have had direct or indirect effects on their U.S. athletic scholarship pursuits. For example, transitioning to a four-year high school program from a five-year high school program¹³

¹³ Grade 13 (OAC) was a fifth year of high school used by university-bound students for university preparation.

has implications for students. In comparing students from the five-year high school program to the four-year one, a previous study found that, although there were no significant grade differences between the groups (though the OAC group's university GPAs were somewhat higher), qualitative measures revealed significant differences in the five-year students, who felt more prepared for university, as the extra year allowed for maturity, mastery of learning outcomes, and the development of stronger study habits and research, writing, and note-taking skills (Brady & Allingham, 2005). Students in the four-year group reported feeling underprepared in the aforementioned areas, especially in the areas of studying and independent research skills (Brady & Allingham, 2005). In this study, eight participants were part of the five-year high school program, while the remaining 12 were part of the new four-year high school system.

For student-athletes who were in high school at the time of these changes, another effect was the loss of an official season of playing for the school team due to the cancellation of sports. Those younger than them (n=12) were transitioned into a four-year high school program, also resulting in a loss of a playing season, which translated into less time and opportunity to develop their statistics, generate buzz for themselves, and be exposed to recruits. In addition, these students had less time to prepare for standardized testing like the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or American Colleges Test (ACT), which are requirements for attendance at U.S. universities, and which Canadian students are usually not exposed to or required to write for university entrance. These changes to education resulted in some participants in the four-year high school program voluntarily taking a fifth year or "victory lap" in order to fulfill additional academic requirements like standardized testing or to play for an additional athletic season (Brady & Allingham, 2010; Chittle, Horton, & Dixon, 2016).

This cohort of athletes were also children when Canadian professional teams (Toronto Raptors and Vancouver Grizzlies) were founded and included in the NBA in 1995 (NBA.com, n.d.)

and when the WNBA was officially created in the summer of 1997 (Augustyn, n.d.). This was the first time when professional women's basketball was widely and regularly televised on major networks like NBC, ESPN, and Lifetime (Staffo, 1998). Previously, within the lifetimes of the participants, professional women's basketball could only be seen through the American Basketball League (ABL from 1996-1999), which was not as widely broadcast, especially in Canada,¹⁴ or during the Summer Olympics (every four years). Women's basketball could also be watched during March Madness, which is the NCAA's national championship tournament for U.S. Division I collegiate athletes; however, the televised coverage of women is often scarce as compared to men's basketball coverage, especially in Canada¹⁵ (Bruce, 1998; Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013; Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999). This aspect is important to note, as it speaks to the visibility of Black female basketball athletes during the participants' childhood, which served as influences that helped to shape this cohort of athletes' thinking about sport, basketball, and their athletic possibilities.

Another form of media representation that shaped the social context of the participants is what I construct as a form of *Black Renaissance*. The participants were children during the zenith of Black R&B music and the golden age of hip-hop. Black youth in this era experienced an explosion of diverse representations of Black life in music, film, and television through shows like the internationally acclaimed *Cosby Show* (1984-1992), which was television's first depiction of an upper-middle/professional class family, and its spinoff, *A Different World* (1987-1993), which was also television's first depiction of Black university students attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). These firsts depicted Black families and male and female Black youth from

¹⁴ The ABL was broadcast on Black Entertainment Television (BET), Fox Sports Net, and SportsChannel during 1996-1999 (Staffo, 1998). Among these options, BET was the only channel available to Canadians as of 1997.

¹⁵ This is also because Canada does not have as many sports channels as U.S. televisions like ESPN, which offers coverage of collegiate basketball.

various backgrounds as upwardly mobile, well-educated, in high-status fields, and with positive interrelationships. Some scholars argue that these representations positively shaped socialization and aspirations of this generation of Black youth (Berry, 1998; Evuleocha & Ugbah, 1989; Ford, 2011; Havens, 2000; Hopkins, 2012; Jones, 2018; Kelley, 1995; Mayo-Mitchell, 2015; Means Coleman & Cavalcante, 2013; Merritt & Stroman, 2016; Payne, 1994). For example, Dr. Walter Kimbrough, former President of Dillard University, states that during the years of the shows' runs (1984-1993), HBCU attendance was 44% higher than the national average. However, in the years after their run, HBCU attendance lagged (Gasman & Kimbrough, 2010). This is of particular importance because the participants of this study are members of the African diaspora and, despite their Canadian nationality, this media programming was also heavily propagating in Canada, shaping Black popular culture in this context. Walcott (2001, 2003) argues that, along with the impact of the dominant Canadian culture, Black Canadian identities are often influenced by African-American culture, as well as by Caribbean and continental African cultures, thus creating complex, hybrid, and pluralistic Black identities. Therefore, these prevalent African-American media images may have also influenced Black Canadian youth of this generation, which could have also shaped their self-perceptions, possibilities, motivations, and cultural reference points.

It is also important to note that, during the childhoods of this cohort in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, there were also many social and political strides made with regard to LGBTQ rights, including the legalization of gay marriage and more social acceptance and media representation. These strides are contextually significant, because many of the participants grew up and were pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships in a social context where homosexuality was only beginning to become more socially acceptable and visible. As a result, during their childhoods, overt homophobia would have been more prevalent, and the constructions of gender, gender roles, and

sexuality would have also been markedly different and more heteronormative than at the time of writing.

Finally, all participants were either first- or second-generation Canadians of Caribbean (n=18) or Continental African (n=2) descent. Previous research also shows that racialized Canadian immigrant youth (first- and second-generation immigrants) demonstrate much higher aspirations towards university as compared to their native-born non-racialized counterparts, even when the analysis controlled for other factors like gender, family structure, and socioeconomic status (Krahn & Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Krahn, 2013). These high aspirations can be partially explained by the high aspirations of their parents (Krahn & Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Krahn, 2013). This is significant because it suggests that their generational statuses as both racialized and recent immigrants may have also shaped their educational aspirations for a U.S. athletic scholarship.

All these contextual factors work together to inform the influences, vantage points, motivations, and overall social context and environment that the U.S. athletic scholarships were pursued in. These contextual factors also shape the social norms, styles of dress, vernacular, values, ideals, and the natures of the structures they navigated.

Chapter 4: Becoming a Girlballer: Early Influences and Deciding to Pursue a U.S. Athletic Scholarship

This chapter explores how the participants became competitive basketball players and the factors that shaped their decisions to pursue U.S. athletic scholarships during childhood and into their high school years, including the role of parents/family, peers, coaches, and the media. Specifically, in this chapter, I examine: 1) how the participants were initially introduced to competitive sport and then ultimately chose basketball as their primary sport; 2) how that choice led to an awareness of athletic scholarships from multiple sources; 3) their key motivations for pursuing a U.S. athletic scholarship; and 4) why they opted athletic scholarships instead of academic ones.

Choosing Basketball

Ease and Practicality

The participants in this study chose basketball as their primary sport for several reasons, including ease and practicality, familial influence, peer influence, and being chosen to play by coaches and teachers. For some participants, sport choice came down to ease of play. One athlete outlined that the ease of playing was shaped by the perceived affordability of basketball:

It was just the easiest sport to play. I didn't need a tutor. I didn't come from a well-to-do family and my parents weren't sports fanatics and were more like: "make sure you do your multiplication tables and reading and are able to get your schoolwork done." So, I didn't really have to ask my parents for gear or travel [funds], because it was included in my [public] school fees, so it was easy peasy.

Here, the participant described how she chose basketball as her primary sport because it did not require much intervention from her parents, who were quite academically focused. Many of the participants described their parents as such, and basketball as a sport they could play without burdening their parents financially, but also a sport that did not require their constant intervention and supervision, as their parents were often working.

In addition to describing basketball as the easiest and most practical sport to play, there was also the underlying belief that it was the most realistic. Many participants shared that basketball

offered them more than just recreation and leisure:

Actually, from elementary school, I played other sports. I ran track and stuff like that, but once I reached high school, it was basketball and volleyball. People who know me know that I also played volleyball, but basketball was more realistic in terms of getting a scholarship. [With basketball], I was actually travelling and was more active outside of school with it as opposed to any other sport.

Like many other interviewees, this participant shared how, in comparison to other sports, basketball provided many opportunities outside of school such as travel. Another participant echoed this sentiment, sharing how she also felt that basketball offered more opportunities than other sports:

Basketball provided the cleanest opportunity for me to do something with it. At the time, volleyball was my favourite and best sport. I was actually initially terrible at basketball, and I'm still not even close to the top one hundred female athletes in Toronto. [But] there were so many club teams and opportunities, a lot of females moving on, and a lot of men moving to the States to play. You have all these club teams and opportunities that you didn't have in other sports.

In using the descriptor “cleanest,” the participant referred to basketball being the most straight-forward medium from which to extract an opportunity from. Rather than perceiving sport participation as just a form of leisure or recreation, many of the participants often referred to basketball as not only something they thoroughly enjoyed, but also as something from which they could see themselves benefitting from. In the passage above, the participant argued that, comparatively speaking, basketball offered more opportunities to play on teams outside of school, which, in her experience, often led to scholarship opportunities in the United States. Therefore, seeing older peers successfully engage with basketball influenced her decision to choose to focus on it as her primary sport, as well as informed her distinction between basketball and other sports.

Familial and Peer Influence on Sport Choice

For other participants, familial influence played a significant role in shaping their sport choice, as their siblings or extended family members were already playing basketball competitively or were former players. For some participants, it was their parents, who were deeply engaged in

competitive basketball themselves, that influenced their interest and participation. In addition, the parents of these participants were often in a position to be more hands-on in their engagement with basketball:

My dad played basketball when I was younger, and I used to follow him around to his tournaments and games. He put me on the school team first and was like: "You should go out for the team." So, I started in middle school, and he was like: "There are some club teams that are a bit more serious that you can be a part of outside of school. Do you want to do it?" He put me in track and field as well.

This participant described how her father's history as a former player influenced her interest in basketball. Because of his insider knowledge as a player, her father was also able to inform her of the opportunities available to play beyond her high school team, facilitating her interest in choosing the sport. Another participant also shared how her father's interest in basketball shaped her own:

My dad was actually a basketball coach and coached a team for about 10 years. When I was younger, I was pretty tall, so I think people naturally expected me to play basketball, which made me actually not want to play. I think by the time I got to eighth grade, I decided I would give it a try and it stuck from there. It was a cool thing and peer pressure won.

In these ways, many of the participants were influenced by not only the affordability and familiarity of basketball through family members, but also through peers who also engaged with basketball. Many participants described their peer groups as being filled with Black youth engaging in competitive basketball. One former player described her neighbourhood as an environment where everyone played basketball:

It was just something I was exposed to. I grew up in Scarborough, predominately Black people. We weren't playing tennis [laughs] or any of those other sports. It was football at recess, or you get a basketball to play "American" [a basketball variation] or elimination. You're playing those games and soccer. Those were the options. I wasn't really exposed to anything else until way later in life.

The quotes above suggest that familial and peer influence played a role in shaping sport choice for the participants. Many athletes described growing up in environments where basketball was the sport of choice and their peers and/or family members were actively engaged with it.

Handpicked by Coaches and Teachers

Sport choice also came through being hand-picked by coaches and teachers who saw potential in them. One participant explained that she was introduced to basketball through a club team (team outside of her high school) while she was working a part-time job in high school:

The coach actually came in and was like: “Oh, wow, you’re really tall!” And she asked: “Do you play basketball?” And I was like, “Sure I do,” which was a lie because I did not. And she’s like: “You should come and play for my team.” And so, I did. That was pretty much the beginning. I was 15 at the time, so I started playing basketball really late.

As indicated by this participant, these offers from coaches or teachers often came due to the physicality of the participants—namely, their height. Another participant who is over six-feet tall shared that she felt that her height was a key deciding factor:

One of the teachers at my school [who was also the basketball coach] approached me like: “Have you ever played basketball?” I replied no, and he was the one who really got me into it. I honestly think that my height was a big factor in why I picked basketball. I was just trying to use my physical ability. I feel like [I could have excelled] so much more if I played a different sport, but yeah, I think that my height and physical attributes are the biggest reasons.

Another participant shared a similar experience:

Well, I’m tall, [over six feet], so everyone would try to convince me to play basketball at a very young age, but I actually am a volleyball player by nature, and it just so happened that I had an issue with my volleyball coach. I quit and then started playing basketball really late (Grade 12)!

Therefore, for the athletes in this study, choosing basketball as their primary sport was shaped by a variety of reasons. Many found that basketball was the easiest and most practical sport to play, because it did not require much intervention from their parents and initially did not cost much. For other athletes, their interest in and choice of basketball as their primary sport was shaped by familial and peer influences, as they lived in communities where basketball was the primary sport. Some interviewees also had parents and extended family who were former players, who also exposed them to the sport. Furthermore, some athletes were actually hand-picked by coaches and teachers due to their height and perceived physical ability, which resulted in their being offered opportunities

to play on teams inside and outside of school. Given these varied ways that the athletes were introduced to basketball, the ages when they started playing basketball also varied significantly, with some reporting choosing basketball as early as the age of five and as late as the age of 17 (see Figure 4). Many of the athletes initially played other sports such as volleyball and track and field; however, as they learned more about basketball and were further exposed to it, particularly those who were influenced by former or current players (family and/or community members) with insider knowledge, they learned that basketball was the sport most likely to reward them for playing.

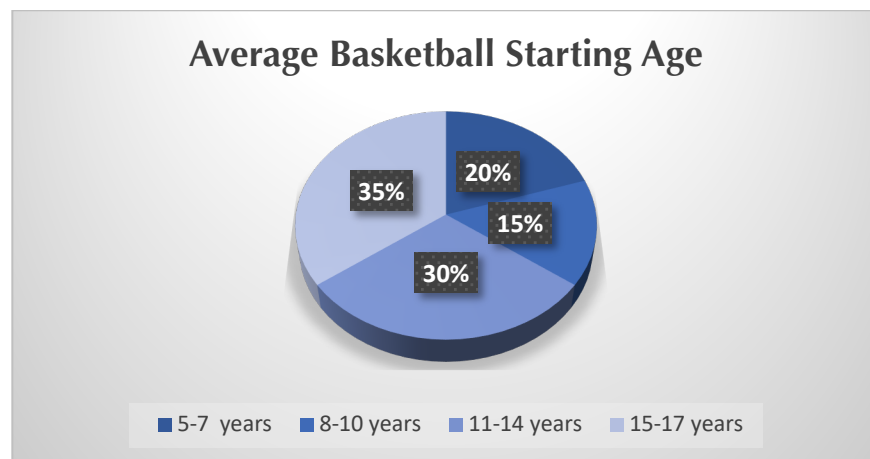


Figure 4. Average Basketball Starting Age

Developing Hoop Dreams: Early Support, Encouragement, and Learning About Scholarship Opportunities

Familial, Peer, Coach, and Other Influences on Scholarship Pursuits

Once introduced to basketball at various ages, the participants needed to develop their skills, which would ultimately lead to their discovery of the more specific possibilities of what competitive basketball could offer them in terms of scholarship and professional opportunities. Many played on school teams and also outside of school on what is referred to as club and AAU teams (see Chapter 5 for further discussion). School team participation was either voluntary through the participants trying out for teams or through being invited by teachers and/or coaches to do so. Club and AAU

team participation was also either voluntary through the participants trying out or through coaches who invited them to play. However, sometimes the participants were referred to teams through their friends who were already playing on those teams. Through these peer relationships and experiences, some participants developed a deeper awareness of U.S. scholarship opportunities. One former player described going to the U.S. on athletic scholarships as something the “majority of her friends did” and as the “norm.” Another participant echoed this experience:

By seeing [others] get a scholarship, it's like: “Yo, I gotta get one, too,” but it's also the encouragement of us all working together to get the same thing and, when you get it, they're happy for you. When someone else gets it, everyone is happy for that person. It's just sharing the love, because everyone understood everyone's goal and even if, for instance, [when I] bounced around and I didn't know what I was going to do, [the older players were supportive].

In the passage above, the participant is sharing how she became aware of scholarship opportunities because, within her social context, many of her peers were pursuing or had already received scholarship opportunities and, accordingly, everyone was rooting for each other. This environment motivated her to pursue one, too.

Sometimes, developing an awareness of scholarship opportunities was as simple as having a family member who was already a U.S. athletic scholarship recipient and getting encouragement: “Well my mom, was like: ‘She [family member] got a scholarship so, you should, too...because you're tall.’ So, that's kind of how the conversation went, and I ended up loving it.” This family member was a few years ahead of the participant and, given their similar physiques, it seemed plausible that she could get one, too. This participant also further learned about scholarship opportunities by watching that family member successfully obtain one. She continued:

I became competitive once she got the scholarship. She got it when she was 19, and I was about 17, so after a year and a half into it, I realized I liked it, and decided to follow suit. I wasn't doing it for myself at the time—it was to please her [family member] and my mom. I didn't have any expectations because if I didn't get anything [scholarship offers], I was like: “Whatever, I've only been playing for a few years.”

While the emotional and athletic support and the decision to pursue a U.S. athletic scholarship sometimes came from family and peers who were often former and current players, coaches seemed to also play an integral role in the participants' development and exposure to the possibilities of U.S. athletic scholarships. One participant shared how her coach made her aware of scholarship opportunities:

Myself and [a friend] joined an OBA [rep/club] team and, when we started playing, the coaches started talking to us and developing our skills. They came to me and were like: "If you continue working like this, you can get a scholarship." I was like: "Woah, are you serious?" And they were like: "You can definitely get a scholarship. You have a lot of potential." So, I took it and ran with it.

Another participant shared her experience with a teacher and coach at her school who exposed her to scholarship opportunities through basketball:

My teacher [and coach] definitely influenced me, showing that it's more than just a game. It's like a chance and it definitely changed my life in terms of focusing on ball and focusing on school. There was so much more I could obtain from playing this sport that would change my life. So, I would definitely say my teacher/coach was a huge factor in me pursuing basketball and taking it to the next level.

Coaches also provided emotional support to athletes who were not sure about what basketball could do for them:

He had really me up there like with one of his daughters, on a pedestal regarding how much he felt I could accomplish. He would say things sometimes, and I'm like: "I don't even know what you're talking about, I don't see it." And he's like: "It's there [the potential to get a scholarship], trust me, I always got you, trust me."

In many ways, coaches also helped the participants develop an awareness of American scholarship opportunities by bringing it to their attention. These relationships between the coaches and players were often intense and sometimes became familial (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of the role of coaches in helping the participants secure scholarship offers).

However, some participants only became aware of the possibilities of U.S. athletic scholarships incidentally when American schools unexpectedly reached out to them with letters of interest. While most of the athletes in this study were playing on several teams, some were unaware

of where their playing could take them. One participant described this experience:

I started playing rep [club basketball] in the ninth grade, but I still was behind in regard to knowing you can get a scholarship. A scholarship became a reality in high school. I received my first letter in the tenth grade. What is this? Why are they writing me? [laughs] I was really clueless. I was just playing because I love to compete, and I love the game.

Four other participants echoed this experience of the scholarships falling in their laps:

I didn't realize the extent it would bring me to. I thought I was simply playing at a tournament and next thing I know; I'm getting letters in the mail. I'm just playing basketball, but the end result was the realization that I could get a scholarship.

I was making [club] teams and then started going to the States for tournaments and would get letters in the mail. It was like: "Oh, people want to pay for my education? Why not play basketball?" I thought I was just playing [a tournament] in the States, but my coach knew what he was doing, and that there would be lots of scouts at certain tournaments or exposure camps.

I started playing AAU in the eighth grade because all my friends were playing. Things just kind of fell into place, and next thing I know I was offered scholarships and visits to all these schools. I had no idea what these schools or scholarships were. I was foreign to it all.

I played competitive ball in fourth grade and kept playing and playing. I just tried my best and it got to the point where I was in eighth grade and received my first letter of interest and they just kept coming. I was like: "What's going on? What's this? How do these people have my information?"

Therefore, while the participants learned about scholarship opportunities from peers, family, and coaches, many also simply had scholarship opportunities come to them through American schools seeing them play and then reaching out to them with offers.

"Taking It All the Way": Media Images as Inspiration

For many of the participants, media images also influenced their pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships. While many referenced NBA stars like Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, WNBA stars like Cheryl Swoopes, Lisa Leslie, and Teresa Weatherspoon, as well as NCAA female players, the vast majority of participants referred to Monica Wright, the protagonist in the 2001 film, *Love & Basketball*, played by African-American actress Sanaa Lathan. The film captures the social, athletic, and romantic experiences of a young Black female basketball athlete who obtains an athletic

scholarship and eventually plays professional basketball in both Europe and the United States (WNBA). This film is also one of the first nuanced and mainstream depictions of contemporary Black girlhood that deeply engaged with the diverse experiences of athletic scholarship aspirations of Black female youth in addition to issues of Black femininity, Black mothering, Black romantic relationships, Black beauty ideals, gender roles, and sexism in sport (Greene, 2016; Lindner, 2013). This depiction inspired many of the participants, making them aware of basketball opportunities:

It was all about playing for me. When I was high school, I didn't even think: "One day, I have to think about college," because I was like: "I'm taking this all the way, going pro, and going to go to [an American] college [university] and be the *Love and Basketball* girl!"

Another participant echoed these sentiments:

Growing up—this sounds super corny—but after I watched *Love and Basketball*, I was kind of like: "I don't want to be the cheerleading sister, like I want to be Monica Wright." After watching that, I kind of got into [basketball] more. And as far as like, actual players, growing up, I liked Michigan State Women's Basketball. There was a girl there named Kristen Hainey, and I thought she was the best thing ever.

As revealed by the excerpts above, the vast majority of the participants referenced *Love and Basketball* as a key source of inspiration that elucidated how going to play collegiate basketball in the United States on a scholarship was a gateway to academic and professional opportunities.

Therefore, the participants in this study came to learn about the possibilities of U.S. scholarships in five different ways: (1)-(2) familial and peer influence; (3) encouragement from coaches; (4) incidentally through interested American schools that reached out to them; and (5) through media images. These influences, which they encountered at various ages and often in combination with one another, began to build a knowledge base regarding how their participation in competitive sport could generate opportunities for educational advancement.

Key Motivations for Pursuing Athletic Scholarship

Upon discovering the possibilities of obtaining an athletic scholarship through peers, family, coaches, American schools, and media images, all participants were inspired to pursue one.

However, their reasons for pursuing athletic scholarships varied. For some participants, the inability to afford university was a huge motivator and played “a big role...the biggest role.” For one participant in particular, paying for school was the driving factor: “Other than free education, nothing [else motivated me to play]. I liked and enjoyed basketball, but it wasn’t my favourite sport by any means, and I was not the best at it. I think I realized I could help my parents by getting a scholarship that was probably my driving factor.”

Another participant shared these sentiments, “It was definitely necessary for me to pursue an athletic scholarship [in the U.S.]. Money was as scarce then as it is now, dammit! So, it was necessary at the time.” Four other participants quoted below also felt pressure to lift the burden off of their parents to pay for university:

My parents couldn’t pay for school, so I took it on me, whether or not they agreed. I was like: “If you cannot pay for my school, this is what I’m doing.” And they were like: “As long as it doesn’t affect your grades.” Because I knew they couldn’t pay, it was an added bonus. I was in the double cohort, so my sibling and I were going to university at the same time. Three kids and going to university at the same time?!

There’s a lot of pressure because, growing up in [a working-class community] and knowing my mom couldn’t afford to send me to university, I really wanted to save her that money, and I knew I had to get my grades up. I knew I had to work out and sacrifice so much just to potentially get that scholarship and save that money. I knew that, without basketball, I would not be going to school. I knew that for a fact. So, there was a lot of pressure, and I also had to be an example for my younger sibling. I knew it was going to be hard, but I thought that if I push through and work hard, somebody will pay for me to get an education.

I felt a lot [of pressure]. My parents came from a poor country, so they didn’t have a lot of money. They came to Canada to make a better life for us. They couldn’t afford putting me through university because they also had to care for my siblings. So that was a big thing: get a scholarship so that I don’t have to pay.

I knew I wasn’t going to be able to afford university and was going to have to take out student loans, but I didn’t want to do that. I had the grades to go to a good Canadian university but paying to go to a Canadian school was never a thing for me. Obviously, I could have figured out the finances, but paying for my AAU teams was always a disaster. My parents would help me out, but I didn’t want to put that burden on my mom because I knew that even if she found the money, she couldn’t pay it off for a while. It was always challenging, and I didn’t want to have student debt.

While other participants did not feel direct financial pressure, they saw the potential of avoiding student loan debt such as the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), which made U.S. athletic scholarship opportunities attractive:

Basketball helped because it made everything free, while back home, everyone was complaining about debt and student loans. I thank God so much for giving me talent with basketball. Even after my graduation, me coming back to [an Ontario university] to get my Master's... even that was free!

Another participant echoed these sentiments:

[I didn't feel financial pressure] because I knew school wouldn't be a problem for me. I was always good in school. I knew how to study, and I was in the sciences, so playing sports was a side thing for me. I didn't have any of that pressure; I knew I would be fine in school. My mindset was that I wouldn't be in debt and the little piece of money that I needed to pay for any fees, I could cover it by working in the summer. It was always about [avoiding debt] for me.

However, the financial burden of paying for university and debt avoidance were not the only motivating factors for the participants to pursue a U.S. athletic scholarship. As one participant put it, she simply "loved the game" and felt she owed it to herself to be get a scholarship. Many participants expressed simply wanting to push themselves as far they could go to compete amongst the best athletes and have the experience of living outside of Canada: "[Finances] didn't really play much of a role at all. My parents sacrificed a lot for me and, before the scholarship came into discussion, they had money put away for me for university." For another participant, playing at a higher level drove her: "It was just for playing...it was just because I wanted to play basketball at that level." For another participant, it was simply about the opportunity to go away for school: "[For me], it was about the experience. I wanted to be independent because I always lived at home. I was 18 and very sheltered; I wanted to see the type of person I could be in a different environment."

Conclusion

As in the participants' introduction to and choice of basketball as their primary sport, for the athletes in this study, peer and familial influences within their communities helped to shape and

develop their knowledge about scholarship opportunities. Media imagery also created a *Love and Basketball effect* because the film served as a sort of blueprint, influencing the athletes' interest in scholarship opportunities. As the players became more focused on their scholarship aspirations, coaches began to take on a more central role in their pursuit. In addition, coaches from American universities sometimes hand-picked the athletes by sending them letters of interest after seeing them play. This also built awareness of athletic scholarship possibilities, as these opportunities fell into the laps of many of the athletes. The participants were also motivated by various factors, such as easing their parent's financial burden to pay for post-secondary education, avoiding student loan debt, going as far as they could athletically, and seeking independence by going away to school.

Why Not Academic Scholarships?

The data also revealed that, in the high school years, many of the participants were high-achieving and highly motivated students. When asked to share their level of academic performance in high school, many participants reported that they were in the B+ to A range, with some being on the honour roll¹⁶ (see Figures 5-6).

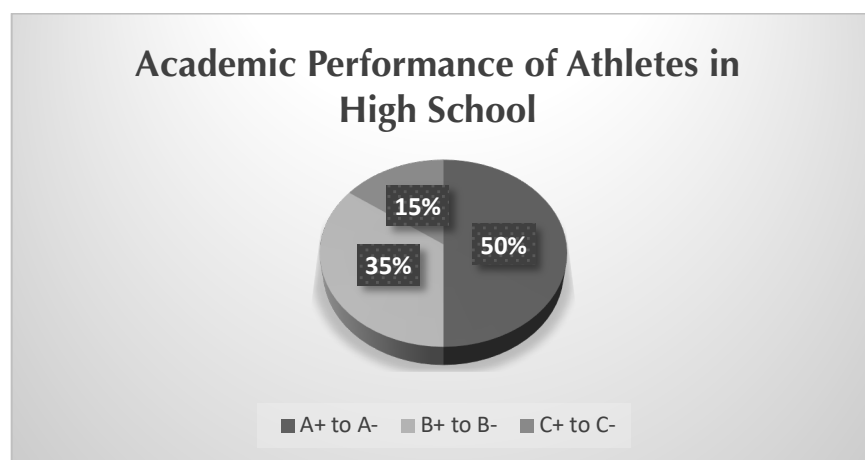


Figure 5. High school academic performance of participants

¹⁶ It should be noted that the criteria for honor roll status varies by school and school board.

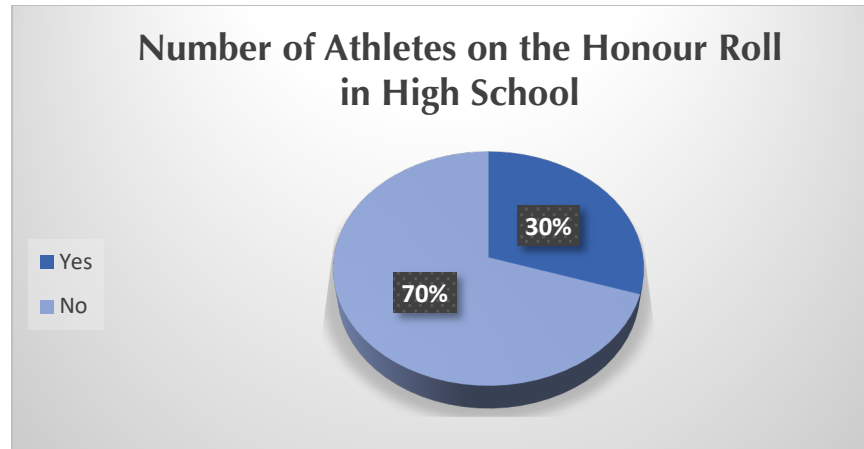


Figure 6. Self-reported high school honour roll status

However, while half of the participants had high school grade point averages in the A range, many expressed that they did not pursue academic scholarships in lieu of or in tandem with athletic scholarships because of unawareness, disbelief in it being an attainable option, as well as perceptions that their grades were not high enough or that they were not smart enough, or that academic scholarships would not have offered them as much as athletic ones.

Unawareness

The vast majority of the participants were simply unaware of Canadian university academic scholarship opportunities that would pay for tuition and on-campus residences or dormitories:

[I did not attempt to obtain or apply for an academic scholarship] because no one had ever discussed that with me. I think a lot of girls think this way, and we all felt that going to the States was better. So that's where we wanted to go. Even though it isn't better [academically], that's the mentality.

Only one participant expressed an awareness and pursuit of academic scholarships, but mentioned that, despite her high grades, she still did not think they were strong enough to get a scholarship and, even in trying to apply as a transfer student to a Canadian university, she was still ineligible. As she said:

I considered [a Canadian University] because they were able to offer an academic scholarship. However, even though I finished with an A average, when I thought of academic scholarships, I figured [that I needed] 95s whereas I had an 88% average. I knew it could get me some money, but I didn't know how much money. I didn't think it would be that much. So, I figured some debt vs. no debt? When I came back to Canada and was transferring to a Canadian university, I asked [the school] about academic scholarships and stuff because when I had a 3.85 out of 4.0 GPA [from my American university]. They told me they were only offering academic scholarships out of high school, so I had to have gone there straight from high school to qualify.

Aside from the above participant, many participants with grades in the A range expressed that no one, including guidance counsellors and teachers, had discussed the possibilities of academic scholarships with them. In fact, many perceived their grades were not high enough: "I don't think my grades in high school were that good that I could get an academic scholarship. But then again, I never thought about it or pursued it or talked to anyone about what my Canadian academic options were." Like many of the participants shared, it was assumed that there was a better chance at obtaining a scholarship with basketball. As one participant noted:

I know there were people who were more interested in academics and, you know, their excitement came from that. The impression [I had was that] you must get 90s and have an average of 99%, to get an academic scholarship [in Canada], and that wasn't my reality, so I took this basketball thing.

Negative Schooling Experiences and the Questioning of Capabilities

Some of the participants also felt that they were not smart enough to pursue or obtain athletic scholarships due to previous schooling experiences. When asked to share their thoughts on the possibilities of securing an athletic scholarship in their high school years, one participant jokingly responded "Yes, if the brain could do it!" Another participant did not know until after she graduated from the university that she was able to perform well enough to get an academic scholarship:

Now that I know that I was capable of [high achievement], I would have tried to get an academic scholarship, but back then, I honestly didn't think I was smart enough. That [thinking] came from experience and how I was deemed in middle school, or even earlier than that. I just wasn't deemed as smart.

Another participant expressed doubts about her ability to secure academic scholarships:

Because I would struggle with insecurities about grades especially, I didn't think I could do that much. Tests stressed me out completely, and I wasn't taught that it's not about getting a higher grade than the person beside you, but [instead about] finding strategies that work for you, studying, and self-help techniques. I [now know that] I can do it, but I wasn't fully aware of how important [that mindset] was. So academic scholarship? No, I didn't think I was smart enough.

One participant felt that race may have shaped her educational challenges:

I don't know [if I could have gotten an academic scholarship]. I was never a good student—I always seemed to miss the mark. When people explained things to me, I didn't always get the explanation, so I never knew if I was doing what they asked. That was a huge hindrance at school and kind of irritated me. And then on top of that, [because of] the [negative] racial undertones throughout my schooling, [I was] not super invested. So, I was never sure if [my experiences in school] were due to me not being great at school or if it was like someone attributing everything to the stupid Black kid. The stupid jumping Black kid.

Another participant shared similar experiences, stating that she experienced lowered expectations from teachers and, as a result, discomfort:

In high school, they have this idea of...they would push this agenda on you ...It's this thing where it's like: "This is good *for you*." Like, "that's good enough given where you're coming from." They never wanted you to get any better [than a certain level], and when you did do better, they were so shocked and surprised and it's like, why [are you shocked]? Maybe I had a little bit of an inferiority complex, because I felt that I was just not a good student. So, I just always never understood what was going on. Things would happen around me and I was like: "I don't get it."

Some of the athletes expressed that they simply did not enjoy their schooling because of the subject matter, which made it difficult to stay engaged enough to even think about pursuing an academic scholarship. One student felt that her teachers generally did not care about her:

It was hard to get that [believing I could do anything] from school because, I was more so on trust. How does this person [teacher] care? I had this pre-conceived notion that they didn't care, so that's why when I had the one who cared, I embraced them deeply. I embraced them for what they did for me because there were lots of places where I wasn't getting that.

While many participants expressed frustration with formal schooling, several interviewees shared that basketball helped them to get through school: "[Schooling] affected [my pursuit of a scholarship] deeply, in a big way. I wouldn't see school if it wasn't for basketball. So that's what

made basketball [a good thing]. Everything revolved around basketball.” Many of the participants in the study were high-achieving, but they also expressed frustration with the schooling system and the ways in which they were made to feel marginalized in their schooling environments. This marginalization may have deterred them from focusing primarily on academic opportunities and contributed to their attraction to basketball.

Perceptions of Academic Scholarships Offering Less

When asked why they did not pursue an academic scholarship, some participants also hypothesized that academic scholarships offered less than athletic ones, including the potential for future athletic opportunities. One participant who had Olympic goals felt that securing an athletic scholarship was the first step to getting there:

I wouldn't have [pursued] the academic scholarship because my goal was to play in the Olympics, and I wanted to maximize the athletic part as much as possible. I wanted to play against the best players in the States to get that sort of training and coaching. That was just my journey, but had I gotten a Canadian academic scholarship and gotten an opportunity to be coached by the [elite provincial and/or national] coaches here, looking back, I would have done that, too.

Another participant outlined that pursuing academic scholarships over athletic ones meant that she would be a “walk on” (someone who tried out for the team, rather than a recruited player), and therefore, would be perceived as less valuable:

I think it would have been a different path. I would have to walk on at the school, and they wouldn't have any idea who I am. I would have had to put a lot of pressure on myself to do well and overdo it. As a recruit, while you have to prove yourself, the coach has a little background about you because they've seen you play. They have a feel for you already and chose you. I'm not saying that I couldn't do it, because I've had to try out before, but there's just something [exclusive] about having an athletic scholarship.

Conclusion

While the participants' experiences were shaped by various beliefs about the currency of their grades, the grades actually required in order to qualify for an athletic scholarship, or their

academic abilities, all of these perspectives were shaped by a profound ignorance of academic possibilities available to them. Many of the participants shared educational experiences that made them feel marginalized, unintelligent, and as if their teachers did not care about them or see potential in them. Some participants also expressed that the subject matter was not engaging, while others hypothesized that race could have shaped those experiences. As a result, many of the interviewees doubted their academic potential despite their high academic achievement and visibility as star athletes in their respective schools. Therefore, for some of the participants, basketball took precedence over schooling and helped them to stay engaged academically.

Discussion

The findings in this chapter reveal several noteworthy aspects regarding sport choice and how the athletes learned about scholarship opportunities during their pre-university years. Firstly, these findings echo the scholarly literature that indicates that Black athletes are overrepresented in particular sports like basketball (Chappell, 2001; Dabovic, 2002; James, 2005, 2011; Kaba, 2012) due to sport socialization through peers, family, and media influences (Beamon, 2010; Bruening, 2008; Bruening et al., 2005; Castine & Roberts, 1974; Clincy, 2010). In many ways, the habitus of the participants played an integral role in shaping their sport choice because of the hyper-visibility of athletic role models in their communities and in the media, as well as because of their initial financial ability to pay for equipment and membership (Bourdieu, 1991; Edwards, 2000; Hoberman, 1997; James, 2012; Saul & James, 2006). Although some of the referenced scholarly research is based on Black American youth and sporting cultures, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the identity formation of Black Canadian youth is often heavily informed by African-American culture, creating hybrid identities that include Caribbean and/or Continental African heritages. This suggests that similar patterns are emerging in the Black Canadian context.

This overrepresentation in basketball is also in part because of what James (2011) describes as an alienating school environment. While focusing primarily on Black males in the GTA context, James (2011) found that Black athletes used basketball as a way to make school more tolerable, to gain recognition, support, and to build skills in ways that were lacking in the academic realm of the pre-university educational period. As described by some of the participants, basketball helped to keep them focused on school as some found their schooling experiences alienating, often describing the content they had to learn as culturally irrelevant and that their teachers had low expectations of them. For some of the participants, these experiences resulted in insecurity in their academic abilities. As James (2011) argues, basketball provided them with opportunities to not only play a sport that they enjoyed, but also to be offered opportunities to play on teams and to learn about scholarship opportunities. Overall, unlike previous findings on Black male youths experiencing academic difficulties, being less prepared for post-secondary study, and having lower graduation rates than their White counterparts (Baker & Hawkins, 2016; Eitzen & Purdy, 1986; Siegel, 1994), the participants in this study received far more athletic support in comparison to academic support, *even in* instances of high achievement. These findings suggest that, like their Black male counterparts, Black female athletes also experience educational alienation and an emphasis on their athletic skill over their intellectual abilities and sometimes respond with a hyper-focus on sport. However, given their strong academic performance, that alienation is not rooted in their academic performance.

These experiences not only reflect the decades-long scholarly literature in the GTA context, which asserts that Black students experience persistent educational disparities and barriers including differential treatment, low expectations, Eurocentrism, and more athletic support than academic,¹⁷

¹⁷ See Bailey, Gray, Brady, & Tecle, 2016; Cheng, Yau, & Zieger, 1993; Dei, 2008; Dei, Mazzuca, & McIsaac, 1997; F.A.C.E.S. of Peel Collaborative, 2015; James, 2012; James & Brathwaite, 1996; James, Turner, George, & Tecle, 2017; Lund & Carr, 2015; Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators (ONABSE), 2015.

but also invoke particular racial tropes: as argued by Carrington (2010a, p. 174) in citing Hoberman (1997), that Black people are perceived as “creatures of the body and not of the mind.” As discussed in Chapter 2, Carrington (2010a) argues that racialized bodies are often constructed as physically and athletically exceptional, but at the cost of their intellect. These logics harken back to 19th-century Darwinian colonial constructions, which marked Black bodies in these ways socially, politically, and globally. Namely, Black bodies are constructed as innately athletically gifted, but also intellectually deficient. These patterns emerged in this study in the ways in which these athletic opportunities often fell in their laps. The participants were easily identified inside and outside of schooling and athletic settings and offered opportunities due to their physical appearance and height. They were also informed by multiple sources of the possibilities of basketball, including professional and academic opportunities through athletic scholarships. These possibilities were compounded by media imaging showing Black male and female athletes overrepresented in sports like basketball, as well as by a popular film outlining the athletic scholarship pathway in great detail.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Black youth in this era were also socialized in an environment that was rich in a diversity of Black (African-American) media like the *Cosby Show*, *A Different World* (set at a fictional HBCU), and films like *Love and Basketball*, all of which emphasized high achievement through either traditional academic means or sport. In addition, this era also showed many positive representations of were successful and desirable Black women in athletic roles who were reaching new heights (the creation of the WNBA in 1997 and regular broadcasting on mainstream channels). This was the first time when Black women, who dominated the professional leagues, were so frequently shown and taken seriously as athletes. Research shows that Black media representation in addition to real life examples are highly influential for Black youth in their imagining of future roles and possibilities and for shaping cultural expectations and fostering a sense of belonging in sport (Adams, 2010; V. N. Adams & Stevenson, 2012; Beamon & Bell, 2002;

Bourdieu, 1991; Carrington, 2010a; Edwards, 2000; Fujioka, 2005; Hoberman, 1997; James, 2005, 2012, 2016; Saul & James, 2006; Singer & May, 2011). As argued by Comeaux (2010) and Wilson and Sparks (2001), Black youth are especially vulnerable to the social forces overemphasizing sports (e.g., parents, overzealous teachers) and media glorification, which results in their identification and attachment to athletic identities.

Secondly, these findings also suggest an imbalance between athletic and academic information and opportunities in the educational environments of the participants. In other words, the showering of athletic opportunities and information was often in juxtaposition with the absence of academic opportunities and information. Accordingly, although many of the interviewees were highly visible at the very least to their teachers and coaches in their schools as top athletes, they were pushed more athletically than academically. Teachers and guidance counsellors were aware of their interest in pursuing athletic scholarships as a pathway to university and yet did not share with the students who were scoring in the 80-90% range¹⁸ other academic options at Canadian universities or even U.S. universities. That is not to assume that the athletes would have opted for those opportunities, but it is clear that, academically, they were not as supported, nor were they given clear, timely, and truthful information in formal academic spaces regarding academic opportunities to the same degree that they were supported and given information about athletic opportunities. In Chapter 5, I further explore the experiences of these Canadian students navigating standardized testing to be eligible for U.S. scholarships, which suggests that, through their engagement with this process, these students would have had some contact with their guidance counsellors throughout their high school years, if not only to manage the administrative side of

¹⁸ Within many Canadian educational institutions, a grade in the 80% range is equivalent to an A letter grade and is considered excellent. A grade in the 90% range is equivalent to an A+ letter grade and is considered exceptional.

transitioning to an American university (grades, test scores, applications, etc.). How were these highly visible students with high grades missed by so many educators?

In examining the literature on high-achieving Black students, it is noted that a key barrier to these students' receiving opportunities for academic enrichment is identification. Scholarly literature in both the American and Canadian contexts demonstrates that Black students are often grossly underrepresented in many forms of academic enrichment such as gifted, Advanced Placement, and Arts programming, while being overrepresented in non-gifted special education (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Chunn, 1988; Ford, 1998; Frasier, 1991; Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004; Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003; Schmidt, 2010; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). In the aforementioned literature, it is argued that the measures used to identify students for enrichment such as teacher recommendation and standardized testing can be volatile and susceptible to cultural bias. In addition, teacher recommendations in particular, can be heavily informed by pre-existing ideas about the abilities and possibilities for groups of students. Given the historical context and the ways in which previous research reflects patterns of exclusion for Black students in academic enrichment, it is no surprise that many of the athletes in this study were flooded with athletic information, opportunities, and interest, from multiple sources, while academically, that interest was not matched. Comeaux (2010) argues that these historical tropes of Black physicality entangled with intellectual deficiency persist and have real-life consequences on Black students. In these ways, formal schooling becomes an additional social force that contributes to the overemphasis of sport as a pathway to success in this group.

Many were able to easily recognize or even project athletic possibilities onto the participants and offer athletic opportunities, which helped to set them on a U.S. athletic scholarship pathway. However, I argue that, given these findings, recognizing and projecting academic possibilities on these Black students was much less likely, even when they showed potential through strong

academic performance. Discourses of intelligence, which mark students as ripe for academic enrichment and opportunities, frequently skip over Black students because they tend to be not recognized as possessing the right kind of capital to be included (Bourdieu, 1986). Since Whiteness and intelligence are intrinsically linked, endowing intellectual supremacy to White students, the measurements and perceptions of intelligence are not necessarily based on merit or ability, but rather, are inherently hierarchical and constructed in ways that reinforce the supremacy of Whiteness (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Intelligence is often constructed as something outside of Blackness, because, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue, success is measured by White heterosexual norms, thus devaluing the human capital that racialized bodies possess based on their perceived distance from Whiteness. Therefore, as the aforementioned research about access to enrichment demonstrates, Black students are frequently excluded from opportunities for academic enrichment and, in this way, we also see how deep sport participation was emphasized in these Black athletes, thereby reinforcing existing historical and racial scripts.

This is particularly problematic for Black youth, who already face significant barriers to university. As Wells (2012) indicates, fewer than 10% of athletes in the U.S. get athletic scholarships, with even fewer getting financial support. For instance, out of 200,000 Division I and II NCAA players, only 4.7% get full scholarships, and fewer than 1% of the recipients are Black. These are poor odds for Black students, especially if they also have the ability to enter university on grades alone. Furthermore, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, while there are many benefits to youth participation in competitive sport, for the athletes interviewed in this study, those benefits also came with various costs and risks. While all participants were able to secure scholarship offers and complete their post-secondary education, they were exceptions to the rule. As Wells (2012) argues, these discourses of success for Black youth through sport reinforce structural inequality by obscuring the need to address the structural, social, and institutional processes that perpetuate class and race-

based marginalization, such as access to enrichment for Black youth or similar levels of support and opportunities for Black students in academic realms. As James (2011) argues, this distorted discourse of meritocracy promotes the idea that hard work in racialized (predominantly Black) and working class students can help them to overcome systemic inequalities, while ignoring the need for systemic changes and obscuring the poor odds of this pathway to university, outside of the few exceptional cases that do win scholarships, and are held up as an example that meritocracy works.

As argued by McNamee and Miller (2004), this myth of meritocracy assumes a societal post-racialism that has yet to be achieved, asserting that hard work will always result in rewards in society, regardless of one's social positioning. However, in the case of this study's participants, their high visibility as star athletes and their hard work as mostly high-achieving students did not translate into their identification by teachers or guidance counsellors as worthy of reward or an increased likelihood of academic support and opportunities.

Therefore, since in this study, the participants' athletic ability took precedence over their academic ability, I posit that the aforementioned hegemonic historical logics and scripts that paint Black people as creatures of the body and not of the mind continue to shape how we understand and think about Black students' futures and possibilities. The academic exclusion outlined in this chapter also reifies a hidden curriculum for Black students that athletic pathways are more viable for them than academic ones, emphasizing hegemonic ideas about the relationship between Black physical prowess and intellectual capacity. As Comeaux (2010) argues, the combination of these factors makes sport a very attractive pathway for Black youth.

Thirdly, another important consideration is the fact that, as first- and second-generation immigrants, the participants may have lacked the tacit knowledge that would have allowed them to navigate the school system to obtain academic opportunities. Research shows that, although first- and second-generation immigrants have high educational aspirations for their children (Krahn &

Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Krahn, 2013), their ability to reach such goals may be hampered by the lack of knowledge on how to navigate educational systems (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; Baffoe, 2011). Moreover, as James (2011) argues, there is a dominant belief that schools' function as equalizers and are meritocratic and democratic, which individualizes successes and failures. Therefore, first- and second-generation students and their parents may internalize these beliefs and feel that, if they were strong enough academically, the academic opportunities would have come on their own (Krahn & Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Krahn, 2013)—the way the athletics ones did. However, unlike the scholarly literature, which predominantly focuses on the underachievement of Black boys in the GTA context and their exclusion, this study suggests that, even when Black students are high-achieving, they still face a general indifference and lack of academic support through the lack of access to and knowledge about academic opportunities. This negates the argument that Black underachievement is solely an individual failing and bolsters the argument that the disparities in achievement faced by Black students are heavily mediated by race and are thus, systemic. This is because even when high-achieving, Black students still lack access to academic opportunities and support in the form of enrichment or, at the very least, being identified as having academic potential and, thus, being made aware of how their academic performance can serve them or support their future endeavours, including the transition to post-secondary education.

Fourthly and finally, the participants demonstrated their possession of high levels of aspirational capital, which is defined as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p.77). Particularly in reference to their educational experiences, the athletes showed an acute awareness of the need to create a divergent pathway to university through sport, which was in part due to financial need. However, even though many of the athletes in the study were high-achieving/potential students and had the grades to easily get into Canadian universities and perhaps, qualify for some financial assistance through academic

scholarships and bursaries, most of the athletes doubted that their academic performance would be enough and opted to circumvent traditional pathways. As such, these athletes were seeking opportunities to reach their full potential athletically, desiring the opportunity for rich athletic competition and experience and felt that academic scholarships would not offer them access to that. Therefore, although faced with challenges in their schooling experiences, including the lack of access to sufficient information regarding academic pathways, the participants still strongly aspired to go to university and opted to create a divergent pathway, using basketball to get access to the spaces and opportunities—both athletic and academic—that they felt were not available to them using traditional means.

Chapter 5: “Getting Looks”: Navigating Athletic, Educational, and Social Spaces to Carve Out Pathways to American Universities

This chapter examines how, once the participants chose basketball as their primary sport and then began playing competitively—while learning from family, peers, coaches, and the media about the possibilities of getting U.S. athletic scholarships—they went on to navigate various athletic and academic structures to obtain scholarship offers. This stage was generally during the middle and high school years (ages 11-19 years old) and required the athletes to attract the attention of American collegiate coaches from who they must obtain scholarship offers. In this chapter, I explore: 1) the sources of information the participants used to figure out how to generate that attention; 2) their diverse pathways to American universities; 3) their outcomes and challenges; and 4) the roles of family, peers, and coaches during the process.

“Getting Looks” from American Collegiate Coaches

The athletes crafted diverse pathways and navigated many institutional structures in order to secure an athletic scholarship (see Figure 9). The crafting of these pathways always included the need for the participants to “get looks,” a colloquialism employed in Black GTA basketball communities to describe the practice of an athletic scholarship hopeful trying to attract and then getting the attention of American collegiate coaches to secure a scholarship offer. To do so, the players needed to generate buzz, and usually during their prime playing years in high school. The participants remarked that this buzz could include getting themselves in the newspaper as a top scorer in key games, creating promotion through word of mouth, being a dominant player on key teams inside and outside of school, or getting themselves on the website (www.hooptowngta.com). Given the participants’ age range, most were using this website as a vehicle during the 2000s, which that time, it was a key source of information and visibility for male and female Toronto area basketball athletes seeking scholarships. At the time of writing, the website featured rankings and

the profiles of top GTA players, teams, and preparatory schools. It also featured a discussion forum, and a section reporting on athletes who had secured scholarship offers (men only).

One of the more accessible ways to get looks was through winning the annual Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations (OFSAA) championships, which bring together top secondary school teams from all over Ontario to compete. In Ontario, high school basketball is regulated by OFSAA, which is a “federation of 18 regional school athletic associations geographically spread across the province” (OFSAA, n.d.). Depending on where the participants attended high school in the GTA, their play on high school teams would have been governed by regional athletic associations under OFSAA, including the York Region Athletic Association (YRAA), Lake Ontario Secondary Schools Athletics (LOSSA), Toronto District College Athletic Association (TDCAA), Toronto District Secondary Schools Athletic Association (TDSSAA), Region of Peel Secondary Schools Athletic Association (ROPSSAA), Golden Horseshoe Athletic Conference (GHAC), and the Southern Ontario Secondary Schools Associations (SOSSA).

Along with playing on their high school teams, all participants played on club teams, or what is colloquially referred to as “rep” teams. Playing on these teams also presented players with an opportunity to generate buzz. Club teams are governed by Basketball Ontario (OBA), a member of Canada Basketball overseeing the basketball development of over 50,000 male and female players in the province on almost 200 club teams (OBA, n.d.). In addition to club teams, Basketball Ontario also governs many elite and selective development camps, such as the Nike Basketball camps, which several participants remarked as another great exposure and player development opportunity. Some players from OBA teams could also be asked to join or tryout for the Canadian national team, which also offers opportunities for players to increase their visibility and athletic status. These teams are for high-performing athletes, are highly competitive, well-respected, and require tryouts. In contrast to their high school teams, when playing on a club team, players must also pay privately to

participate and travel more frequently and further distances. In the club system, players are also segmented into divisions by age, from under 10 (U10) to under 19 (U19). Teams are also segmented by level of competition, with games and tournaments usually played on the weekend and practices throughout the week at various locations. The season runs from fall until early spring and culminates with the Ontario Basketball Championships, colloquially called “OCs.” There were also opportunities for top players to be selected for more elite teams like the Ontario All-star Team and Team Ontario (a team to represent the province’s best players), which would compete in the Canada Basketball National Championships. Key club teams during this era of play included, but were not limited to, Grassroots, Sultan Prospects, ETBA, Scarborough Hurricanes, Flying Angels, Toronto 5-0, Oakville Vytis, A-Game, Triple Threat, Girlballer/Charisma, Brampton Blue Devils, Transway, and the Toronto Lords.

In addition to both high school and club teams, the participants also played on Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) teams; an American-based non-profit, multi-sport governing body for amateur athletes (AAU, n.d.). These teams were usually created by well-known GTA coaches and were often travelling teams where the athletes would play against American teams in games and tournaments. These teams presented further and essential opportunities for the players to generate buzz and get looks, as coaches from top basketball programs across the United States would often be in attendance and looking to recruit players. Like club teams, AAU teams are geared towards high-performing athletes, but also with athletic scholarships in mind. These teams are also highly competitive, require tryouts, have higher travel demands (outside of Canada). Furthermore, players must also pay privately to participate and often have to cover travel expenses and accommodations. For further exposure, some participants also played in player showcases organized by various entities. Showcases are recruiting events with sometimes quite high entry fees. Rather than playing with teammates like on a club or AAU team, individual players play for a crowd of American college

and university recruiters, which serves as an opportunity to liaise with U.S. coaches and solicit scholarship offers.

Through playing on the high school, club/rep, and AAU teams, most participants were able to elicit scholarship offers from American schools. However, if the athletes found themselves without a scholarship after attempting the aforementioned pathways, or were unimpressed by the offers they received, or needed another year to get exposure, raise grades, or prepare for the SATs or ACTs, another option was to attend a preparatory (prep) school.¹⁹ While very few participants used this pathway, the ones who attended preparatory schools in the United States did so during their grade 13 or gap year. These schools offer scholarship hopefuls an educational environment with a heavy emphasis on athletic development and getting exposure to basketball scouts, without interfering with their years of collegiate playing eligibility. Many preparatory schools also turn out male and female athletes who can forego collegiate athletics and go straight to professional leagues. The participants stated that they stayed in a dormitory and had their meals prepared by chefs. Costs for preparatory schools vary widely—from free to tens of thousands of dollars—with some offering needs-based financial aid. In the end, these athletes received similar scholarship offers compared to those received by their peers who did not attend a preparatory school.

¹⁹ During this playing era, there were few preparatory school options for GTA players, especially for female athletes. In order to attend, interested athletes had to move to the United States. However, at the time of writing, the GTA now has numerous basketball preparatory programs, some of which are affiliated with top GTA private schools and offer access to scholarship opportunities in addition to private school education (Campbell, 2018; Powell, 2019). A National Preparatory Association (NPA) for elite amateur male basketball competition across Canada was also established in 2016 (National Preparatory Association, n.d.). Provincially, the Ontario Scholastic Basketball Association (OSBA) is a recently established entity which supports both male and female athletic development with a mission “to provide elite level competition and exposure to premier high school basketball student-athletes, and in turn raise the entire basketball environment in Ontario and Canada” (Ontario Scholastic Basketball Association, n.d.).

Outcomes and Varied Pathways

For the players, the purpose of all this exposure and generating buzz was to get offers from American schools, which all of this study's participants successfully did. However, the number and types of offers varied and came at different times. Some participants received offers as early as middle school, while others received them as late as their grade 13 (OAC) or gap years, or in preparatory school. Moreover, as shown in Figure 7, the number of scholarship offers received by participants also widely varied, with some receiving a handful of offers, while others received hundreds.

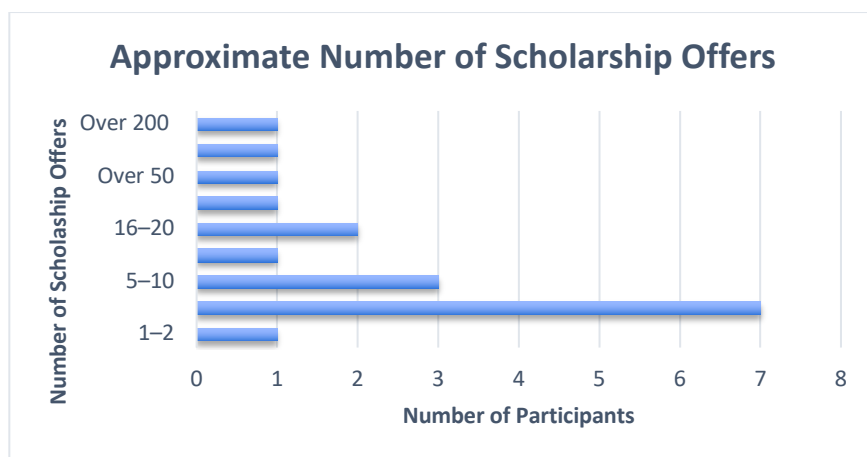


Figure 7. Approximate number of scholarship offers

While 65% of the participants received offers directly to a Division I basketball program in the NCAA in the United States,²⁰ which is considered the highest level of collegiate play in the North American context, 35% of participants received offers to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) or the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA). The NAIA is the governing body for smaller 4-year American colleges and universities (NAIA, n.d.-a, n.d.-c). This association differs from the NCAA in that it offers scholarships to degree-granting institutions, but with less bureaucracy, which can be a benefit for international players like Canadians (NAIA, n.d.-

²⁰ Division I schools in the NCAA are the most visible, have the largest athletic budgets, and, therefore, offer the most athletic scholarships (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018). Division II and III schools have smaller budgets and thus, offer less in terms of athletic scholarships. Accordingly, these schools are also less athletically competitive.

a, n.d.-c). The league is also less esteemed than the NCAA, but it still is highly competitive and provides athletes with the needed visibility if they would like to transfer schools or pursue professional playing opportunities. The NAIA is divided into two divisions: the first division offers the most scholarships, while the second division offers approximately half the number of scholarships (NAIA, n.d.-b).

The NJCAA is the governing body for community or junior college athletics in the United States and is the least competitive and esteemed of the three. The schools in the NJCAA are often colloquially referred to as “Ju-Cos.” These junior or community colleges are roughly equivalent to what Canadians refer to as “college,” and scholarships are limited to two years (NJCAA, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). Like the NCAA, the NJCAA is also divided into three divisions, with the first division offering full scholarships that include coverage for room and board, the second division covering only tuition fees, books, and some supplies, and the third division offering no financial assistance at all (NJCAA, n.d.-a). For many athletes, the NJCAA’s “Ju-Cos” served as a bridge to bigger and better scholarship offers to NCAA Division I schools.

Ivy Leagues and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

The schools that offered scholarships to the participants were also diverse in type, reputation, and ranking, including private elite Ivy League institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Overall, 20% of the participants received offers from Ivy League schools, and 25% accepted offers from HBCUs. The offers to American Ivy League schools were often the result of the exposure received from the participants’ playing on AAU teams. The participants shared that they were excited about the opportunity to attend these institutions and felt good that, even though their athletic skill initially attracted the offers, they also qualified academically to attend. However, despite the prestigious offers, all the participants declined the offers because, in contrast to non-Ivy

League schools, those schools did not offer the athletes full coverage for tuition and room and board, leaving them with tens of thousands of dollars in additional expenses per year. As one athlete stated:

I could not go to [Ivy League institution] because they did not offer a full scholarship. Depending on how much your parents made, they would offer a certain amount, but for me to get a decent amount of financial aid, they had to make basically nothing. My parents made a decent amount of money, but because of debt and the children they had, it was not a true reflection of the amount of money they could actually contribute. After crunching the numbers, I still had to come up with 20K a year to go to that school! While they would pay three-quarters of my expenses, which is amazing, it just was not financially realistic for me at the time.

Given the additional expense, the fact that paying outright at Canadian universities was a fraction of the cost, and that offers from non-Ivy League institutions provided full scholarships, all the participants declined the offers. On the other hand, those who were able to secure offers from HBCUs usually accepted them, apart from two participants who accepted other offers.

Because of the highly differentiated pathways that could be taken by the participants as they navigated the collegiate athletic landscape in America, several of them also transferred between institutions a number of times before obtaining their undergraduate degrees, with 40% of the participants not transferring at all, and the remaining 60% transferring schools up to five times (see Figure 8).

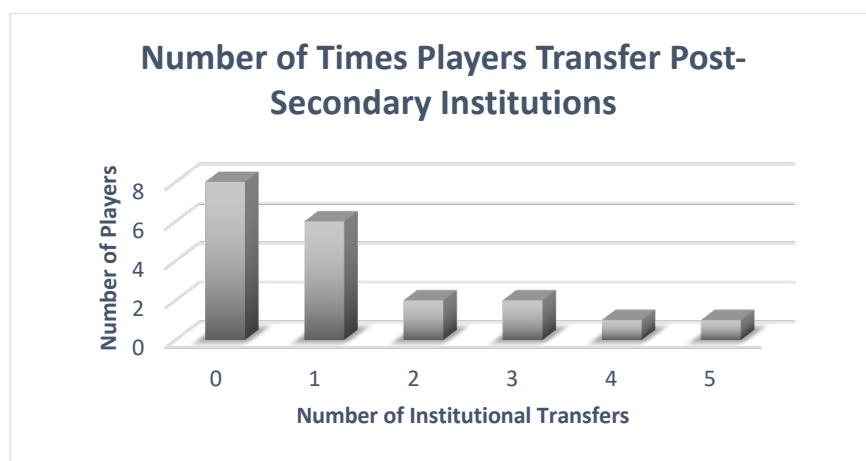


Figure 8. Number of institutional transfers

These transfers also included transfers into USports (until 2016 named Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS)), the national governing body for university-level competitive sport in Canada, and the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA), a national college-level sport governing body for provincial community college sport, such as the Ontario Colleges Athletics Association (OCAA), which some of the participants engaged with. These Canadian sporting institutions also served as pathways to university for the study participants if American scholarships did not work out. Returning to Canada was prompted by various reasons, including teams folding, poor team matches, or injuries (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). Upon return, OCAA teams could also be used as a pathway back to the U.S. or to Canadian universities, which could be their final destination, unless they pursued professional basketball careers overseas (International Basketball Federation (FIBA) or the Euroleague), Olympic competition, coaching, or graduate studies. None of the participants pursued professional opportunities in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), as overseas opportunities were much more lucrative. The highly complex and differentiated pathways forged by the participants are illustrated in Figure 9.

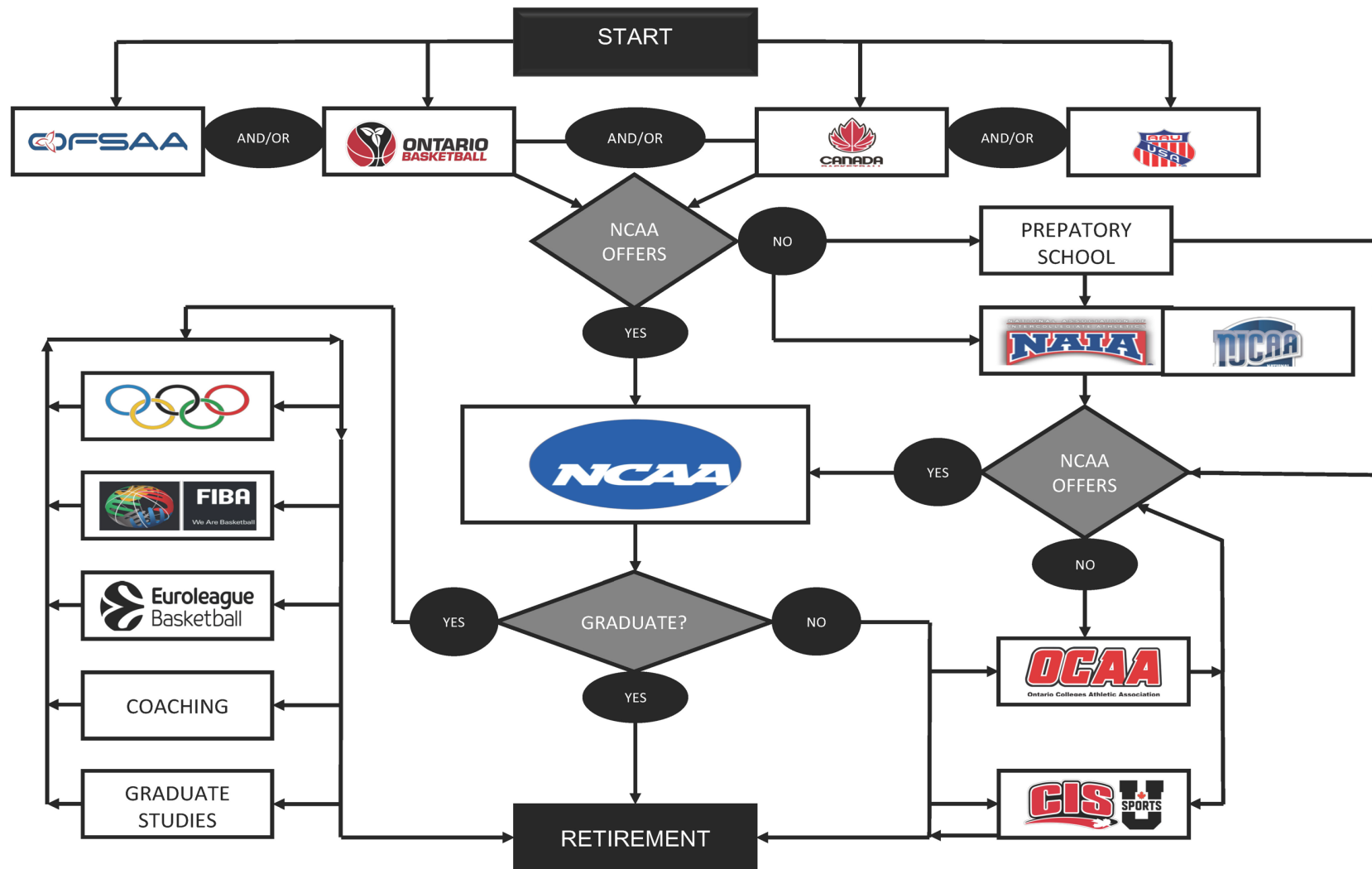


Figure 9. Visual representation of basketball pathways

Co-Constructing Pathways Through Informal Networks of Support

Given these highly complex and diverse pathways and the age when the participants were constructing and navigating them (11 to 19 years old), the participants heavily relied on informal networks of support comprised of their parents, peers, and coaches who took on various roles to help them navigate their pathways, while also acting as sources of motivation and encouragement.

Parents

The participants shared diverse perspectives on the role of their parents in supporting their scholarship goals. At the very least, for most of the participants, parents played an integral role in funding their scholarship aspirations through paying for teams, uniforms, and travel. For others, parents played an instrumental role in helping them navigate scholarship offers, such as through researching opportunities and ensuring maximum exposure to field the best offers. Many of the participants described that, when a school was courting them seriously, they would be invited on a campus visit to check out the team, facilities, and school to help influence whether they would commit to the offer. The expense of these visits was usually covered by the school. One participant shared how her father helped her weigh and consider her options:

My dad was the one taking me on [university] visits. You know, talking me through the pros and cons of each school, kind of getting me to break it down and talking to coaches. He was more of a direct influence on me and on my direct [campus] visits. He really supported me.

For other participants, parents showed support by helping them to navigate club and AAU systems. One participant shared how her parents did this by taking on multiple roles:

They definitely played the role of being supportive. Taking [me on] road trips, travelling, spending the money for me to get from point A to point B, practices, games...they were also there when I had to study, making sure I was on top of my schoolwork and just that motivation.

For some, support was shown through their parents coming to games and cheering them on, no matter how far they were. One participant shared how her father vigorously supported her, sharing that he “would come to all my games when I needed him to, travel, and help the team get

places. If we had to get to Michigan, or [other places in the United States], he would just be there.”

Another participant shared how the support bonded her family:

They were very much the parents who came out to everything and cheered us on regardless of whether we won or lost, and my sibling was playing basketball, too, so we were all kind of in it together, and we loved playing, and it was just something that our family loved, and we were always around. It was just a bonding thing for us.

For other participants, their parents were unable to be as involved for a host of reasons, including work commitments, which made them unavailable to take their children to practices and games. One participant noted how her parents’ work schedule shaped their rate of participation:

[My parents] were supportive, but not in the daytime. They were supportive as far as: “Yeah, good job, you play basketball, you look very cool, good luck,” but they weren’t at every practice and [like] some parents, talking to coaches. Some parents are driving to each tournament, but my parents had to work, and they couldn’t drive me every other night to practice either.

Another participant noted that her parents were “not that into sports” and cared more about grades and, therefore, were not as involved stating that, “they never watched us play. They’re just anti-sports. They worked so hard and, as long as we got good grades, they kind of just left us alone to do our own thing.”

Therefore, while some participants had heavily involved parents, others had parents who were more hands-off in the process, but still showed moral and financial support. It should be noted that the parents who were the most involved tended to be former athletes themselves, or had multiple children involved in competitive sport. The parents who were less involved were often working, had multiple children to care for, and were more invested in the academic performance of their children, seeing basketball as leisure.

Peers

Friends and peers also played a key role in supporting the participants’ scholarship aspirations. Non-athlete peers for most part played the role of cheerleaders by showing support

through attending games and offering words of encouragement. They also offered balance, since most of the athletes had peer groups full of other basketball players also pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships. One participant remarked that her non-playing friends offered balance to her basketball-intensive lifestyle:

They helped me to just lighten the mood. They were people who took me out of the basketball [mode] to just talk about other things when I didn't want to talk about basketball. Basketball was a very dominant thing in my life, so they helped to just lighten things up.

Their male and female basketball peers also played a supportive role, which many participants called "boosters" who would boost their confidence. One participant recalled such a friend:

I think they looked at me like, you have to make it and you have to do it for the city [of Toronto]. It's more than just you. A lot of guys in my community wanted to train me, play against me, or with me because they saw something in me that said: "Yo, this girl can make it, she can take it far, you're going to the WNBA! [laughs]" They'd always say that. They saw something in me that said that you can make it out of this [neighbourhood] and be a better person, a better player.

This participant is also speaking to the working-class community she was raised in, where many youths did not end up going to university. In this way, her peers were encouraging her to use her talent as a way out of the community to pursue better opportunities. They also helped to facilitate the athletic exposure of their peers by doing things like editing game tape.²¹ For many participants, the athletic support of their peers strengthened their confidence regarding their playing ability:

My friends, mainly [a teammate], was on me about playing and boosting my confidence because I didn't think I was good enough to play and I was insecure about starting [to play] late, so there was so much catching up to do. She was probably my guardian angel.

Another way that the participants were supported by their basketball peers was through helping each other to prepare for the standardized testing component of the recruitment process. As

²¹ As part of the recruitment process, some players compiled video footage of their gameplay and create a highlight reel. This reel is then sent to various U.S. basketball programs to solicit scholarship offers. In this study, only two participants referred to the use of highlight reels.

Canadians, entry into universities does not require students to write the SAT or ACT tests. However, as the participants were seeking entry into American universities and colleges, preparing to write these exams was a learning curve. One participant shared how she and her basketball peers worked together to prepare:

My core [helped me] —the guys that went away [on a scholarship], that played at [my school], and the girls—we were all of the same mindset. When we had to take our SATs, we studied together, trying to figure stuff out. None of us had any experience with this or a clue what was going on, but we were all in it together. And if one parent was heavily involved in their child's education, the full process of going to the States, they would relay the information, and that's how we found out what to do. Who's taking it the same day? It was an amazing experience because I know I couldn't have done half the things that I was able to do without our core group, because we were learning from each other.

This sentiment represents the experiences of many of the participants not only in SAT preparation, but overall, in pursuing scholarships. Many worked together in informal groups to share information, build knowledge, and navigate athletics and education to get looks. Another participant shared a similar experience:

I wouldn't know how to take my SATs without all my peers. We were going through the whole process together and, because I went through the same thing with other people, it was definitely more doable. We're all in this together. I *can* do the SAT, it's not this daunting thing. This going to the States thing isn't as scary... There were also people who came back to tell us the experience, you know?

One participant characterized these groups as a family:

So, it's like sharing information too. We are sharing information with each other. Not just about this school or that school, but just that catching up of like: "How did that tournament go? Did you get any looks? Ok, so how do you feel?" Just having that general conversation and feeling supported. It's like a family, and it's not just necessarily with getting the scholarship, but everybody knows what everybody's goal is and, once everybody gets that, everybody's happy for everybody.

Therefore, for many of the athletes in the study, peers were a vital source of support and information in their pursuit of U.S. scholarships. These peers could include non-athlete friends, teammates, as well as other male and female scholarship hopefuls. Many constructed their peers,

along with their parents as a part of a core group that helped them navigate the process of getting an athletic scholarship.

Coaches

Another key part of the network of support includes the various coaches the participants played under. These coaches were from either their school, club, or AAU teams. While all the participants spoke to how coaches spent countless hours developing their athletic abilities, coaches would frequently take on other roles, such as the roles of mentors, providing opportunities to play in order to get looks, and helping them to navigate their scholarship offers. Coaches would be chosen in a variety of ways including players being recruited by coaches or through referrals from peers. For the participants, the reputation of the coach mattered, and they used this to help them decide whether or not to play under them. For many, this reputation was based on their coach's ability to successfully and repeatedly "send off" many players to U.S. schools through scholarships. One participant remarked how her coaches' reputation helped her choose him: "Well, my coach at the time was well-known for sending people off. Before me, he sent 23 girls off with a D1 scholarship, right? So, I knew I was in good hands. It was just a matter of me being able to perform and play at that level, you know?"

For many players, once they found a good coach, those coaches took on a mentorship role. They simply took some players under their wing, constantly exposing them to intensive athletic development, scholarship opportunities, and player showcases and tournaments for exposure to American scouts. Sometimes that coaching support also included help in producing highlight reels. Other forms of support were just about putting the athlete in appropriate and opportune spaces:

My OBA coach was always like: "There's a tournament, we gotta go! There's a showcase, we gotta go!" One time, it was just me, him, and one other girl, and we just went to the showcase. We took the bus and then we took a train to Maryland. I'll never forget it. He's like: "No, you have to go." He really pushed it because I was like: "I can't do it," and he was like: "You're going, period!" [laughs]

Many participants echoed these sentiments, sharing how their coaches demonstrated deep investment in the athletes' talent, ensuring that they secured scholarship offers. Accordingly, coaches would sometimes act as a liaison between potential U.S. school and the athletes. One participant mentioned how she had two key coaches who helped her navigate the athletic scholarship terrain:

I definitely had people in my circle to help me with [navigation] and showed me there were opportunities out there, because my mom and I did not know what to do or how to get started. The people in my circle were, [top Toronto coach #1] who recruits girls from Toronto to go to the States and has a lot of American university connections. He was definitely in my circle from grade 10. [Top Toronto coach #2], he's a controversial man [laughs], but he definitely was in my circle to help get my name out there and had teams come to Toronto to watch me play. So, I feel like it's all about who you know and that's the life lesson: you have to know people to help you get to the next level. These coaches, [includes two other top Toronto coaches], were my coaches in high school and we'd just work out all year and then travel to the States to get recognition. It was definitely those guys in my circle. They were like the liaison between the schools and my mom. They'd call me on the phone and would take calls and letters from schools.

Another participant shared a similar experience:

They [the coaches] were definitely the liaison between universities, my mom, and myself, managing the communication between the schools and my family. They were the ones talking to teams on my behalf and also played their role in getting me into shape and me getting in the gym before school and after school, building that discipline in to train at the next level.

One participant even referred to her coaches during this phase as extended family:

They were like my extended family and very instrumental in helping me get a scholarship. 100%. They knew [what to do] and were talking to college coaches, getting insight into my strengths and weaknesses. There was a school heavily recruiting me that came to watch me play. I played really badly and the [U.S.] coach called me and said: "You were number one on our recruit list, but after seeing you play, you're down to number three or four now, but we'd still like you to be around just in case." I started crying and called my coach right away, and he was like: "We're getting in the gym 7 a.m. on Monday morning." So, we trained, three or four times a week, focusing on the things I needed to work on that prevented me from solidifying a scholarship right there and then. I was very fortunate to have coaches like that. My OBA coach, who lived in the East end and she in the West-End, would pick us up from the subway station, and we'd live at his house with his family in the summers. His wife would cook for us, and we'd be in the gym from 9 to 5 every day. We'd go back home on the weekends and then do the same thing all over again. I was very fortunate. They were like second fathers to me. They're amazing, and I owe much of my success to them because they were ready and willing to help me.

This passage demonstrates not only the intimacy between coach and player, but also the trust and commitment to getting players scholarship offers. Many of these OBA and AAU coaches are not formally paid a salary and making the investment to shift living arrangements and train players multiple days a week, on early mornings, and for long hours testify their commitment. Moreover, while some coaches often went to great lengths to support their players through intensive workouts, liaising with U.S. coaches, creating, and editing game footage, or even helping to craft letters of interest for their players, others went even further and offered financial support:

My coach was the one who got me started and if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be playing basketball. My parents weren't really into taking me [to practices and games]; they weren't into sports, and they had work, so he would take me to every game. He got my first practice T-shirt, shorts, and shoes to literally get me started.

Therefore, many of the participants expressed that they had close, positive, and supportive relationships with their coaches and heavily relied upon on them for their athletic development. However, not all experiences with coaches were positive. There were some caveats, as some coaches were, as some participants described, "shiesty" or shady. Some coaches were simply better than others, and some just more knowledgeable. The participants identified the following three areas of challenge when dealing with coaches: differences in goal alignment, experiences with misguidance, and, sometimes, outright lying and exploitation. One participant discussed how race played a role, and how she and her White coach were not in alignment about her long-term goals:

[The race of the coach matters]. And I say that to say this, it depends on how aware the coaches are of your goals, and how aligned they are with getting you to reach that goal. For example, if they knew the type of person I was, or the types of experiences I value, like learning about Black history, and what I wanted to study. They were just looking at me from an athletic perspective and not my overall life goals. What do you want to get at the end of the four years? I want to go for school, not for just playing basketball and then going overseas. That's not my deal, but that's the lens they looked at me through. After the four years, I wanted to start my career. [It matters] if they are in alignment with your long-term goals.

In this passage, the participant expresses her frustration with one of her former coaches who did not develop a close enough relationship with her to truly understand her long-term goals.

Instead, he constructed her as solely an athlete and mentored her in a way that was not in alignment with her long-term plans of retiring from basketball after undergraduate study and focusing on a non-athletic career. Another player expressed this type of misalignment of goals when her coaches caused her to miss out on an opportunity to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU):

My first scholarship offer was from an HBCU, and the coaches were like: “No, you don’t want to go to that school, it’s this, it’s that, it’s an all-Black school, it’s not good academically.” Right, okay fine?! So, I don’t go to that school, but they then sent me to a Junior College [JuCo]. I didn’t know anything about JuCos. The whole purpose of me coming here and rejecting the HBCU is because you say they aren’t strong academically, yet you send me to a school where I’m breezing and not being challenged at all? While I don’t regret my choice, I realized I would have loved to be in that HBCU environment and in hindsight, it was the wrong advice. I don’t regret it and the life experience I had was awesome, but if I could do it all over again, I would’ve definitely gone to an HBCU. So, [coaches can be] good and bad. I often trusted a lot of what they said and held it as gold.

This participant outlines how coaches dissuaded her from accepting a scholarship from a Division I HBCU by constructing it as a lesser institution, in order to take an offer from a junior college, which is roughly the educational equivalent of a Canadian community college and would require her to transfer to a university to get a degree. This participant also alluded to the power dynamics between she and her coaches, which made her feel like she had to trust their advice. Feeling that she was given bad advice, she continued:

Trust me, it was several of them, but I realized their mindsets at that time were different. A White coach was telling a Black kid not to go to a Black school, like “What were you thinking?” Seriously, that doesn’t make any sense. Or a Black coach who’s only dealt with males going to the States? Like all these [factors]; a boy wanting to go to the NBA would not want to go to an HBCU. In terms of exposure, [for males] ...the reasoning was valid, but just not for me. It didn’t fit my goals, but I didn’t [understand] all these factors then.

This poor advice was in part shaped by race, because White coaches constructed the HBCU as an inferior institution and, therefore, advised the athlete to turn down a scholarship offer to a good university. The poor advice was also gendered, because one of the coaches was a Black male who usually coached boys and was offering advice based on what worked best for NBA-bound male

players, ignoring the fact that female players play within a different context with different opportunities and destinations, and, therefore, may need to take different pathways, especially when her primary goals are an undergraduate degree and a non-athletic professional career. After her time at the junior college, this participant secured another offer at a predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the NAIA and completed her degree and playing career there. This participant's experience elucidates how players can sometimes be misled and disadvantaged if there is a goal misalignment between themselves and their coaches.

Some of the participants felt that another barrier that they faced throughout the scholarship process was misinformation, and that they needed more information in order to make the best decisions:

For me [a key barrier] would be information. I was misinformed a lot. I didn't know what the process of picking a school should look like. How do I learn about these schools? How do I make the best decisions? I didn't know anything about it; it would have helped to know a little bit more about the process and how it works.

Sometimes, the misinformation could take on the form of outright lying or exploitation. One participant shared how coaches would make false promises:

I knew a lot of coaches who made false promises to their players and their parents. They know they have no connections, no networks, no nothing, but have a 12-player team, with at least 3 or 5 girls, who are good enough to get scholarships. My coach was one of the best in the city for connections, and he got a [U.S.] school to watch me play in a full game after basketball season. They came all the way to Canada see me and I played well, but before the scrimmage, he was all: "College and university, I told you guys it would happen. They're here to look at some of you guys," to my teammates. In the back of my mind, I knew he wasn't telling them the truth [because they had only come to see the participant and weren't interested in the rest].

Another participant alluded to how some coaches would use sending girls to the U.S. as some sort of money hustle:

Participant: For some coaches, it's a hustle. They knew their stuff, and they had connections, and it was a good thing to play in those tournaments, you know? They'd be like: "I have this tournament coming up, do you want to play?" Then we'd assemble a team and then from there, you are kind of unofficially on this team if they are going on a road trip. It's in that weird casual state all throughout high school. You end up getting your name in the paper a

few times and just kind of chipping away at making a name for yourself in high school and are able to say: “Okay, I was player of this and that week and the other week...” And then you start applying and letters start coming and I sometimes got letters from schools, and I had no idea where they came from. But yeah, those guys [running those informal teams] would make money off of people.

Interviewer: So, what was in it for them?

P: They get paid!

I: They get paid?

P: They get paid, man! Hell yeah, they get paid for recruiting players or they get things like—I don’t want to make wild accusations, so please consider what I’m saying here—there are definitely times where you go to tournaments and you have to pay your fee to go to the tournaments, but the fee that they’re giving you is an exorbitant amount, and the coaches are not actually paying that much. They get a break, and they’re quick talkers. They figure it out. So, whatever deal they get, you’re not getting any part of that. So, they’re pocketing some of that.

In this passage, the participant alluded to some of her playing experiences where she witnessed a lack of financial transparency from coaches. Because there is an entry fee for showcases and tournaments, when a team of 10-12 players all pay a high fee amounting to thousands of extra dollars, which exceeds the team entry fee for the tournaments. Moreover, if a coach has a reputation for helping to generate buzz for players, it is also more likely that he will be trusted by players and their families. She continued:

[A hustle is] exactly what it is. That’s how I know they move, because it is when they send the boys away to these prep schools, JuCos and stuff like that. They send them and they get paid by the school, but the kids are living in horrible conditions. They’re [the players] out there floundering. These guys just dropped them off and they’re like: “Here’s your dream,” and they go back to Canada and [the players] don’t know the ropes, or they don’t know what’s expected of them. They think that they’re going to play for a really reputable school, and it’s really not like anything they expected.

In this passage, the participant outlined how the “hustle” can go even further, with students being placed in junior colleges and subpar prep schools without any guidance or support, because the schools themselves pay the coaches money for sending them top players. These experiences indicate how pursuing U.S. athletic scholarships as a pathway to university can be precarious, as

some coaches can be unscrupulous or can unintentionally, due to their own biases or lack of experience, misguide or derail athletes. Some participants also had to learn to be discerning when dealing with coaches, as some would simply waste their time:

I just didn't like the politics at all. You have to be a certain person to play based on your ability. Some people work hard, go to all the training sessions, and they didn't want you there. They do that to lots of girls: "Come to the sessions, come to work out" and then at the end of the summer they're like: "Actually, we'll go with the other one." You knew from the beginning, so why string me along? They string people along and keep their old girls, the girls that they know. I just want to play. If you're good, you should play.

One participant in particular circumvented the heavy reliance on coaches and worked independently to get recruited. She recounted her experience as follows:

I took my recruiting into my own hands. I was doing showcases [in the U.S.] and sending an athletic resume with a cover letter explaining who I was. The resume was my stats for my years [of play] and my awards. I emailed like 1,000 schools, every DI school you'd know and division two schools, and I went on a couple visits. I emailed and I asked the coaches if they would like me to send a game tape and if they hit me back, I sent them videos. I had a few schools respond and those two schools were the ones that were mainly like: "YES, yes, yes, we have this, we want you to come." I focused on those two schools because they showed the most interest in me. I took it into my own hands because I felt like it wasn't happening the way I wanted it to happen. I would get a letter here and there, but it was coming down to my senior year and I didn't have an offer yet.

Impressed with her ingenuity and determination, I probed as to why she decided to take this path, rather than depend on coaches as many of her peers had done. She explained:

I told you; I was motivated. I just did not want my mom to have to pay. That was my gift to her, you know. I was really focused on that. So, I sent out the athletic resume. I also sent out examples to younger athletes because [my coach] was big on [supporting younger players].

While trying to get looks from American schools, the vast majority of the participants relied heavily on their informal networks of support, which included their parents, athletic and non-athletic peers, and coaches to learn about how to get U.S. athletic scholarships and to navigate the process of fielding offers. However, while most had very positive relationships with their networks of support, some had negative experiences with coaches.

Challenges

During the process of trying to get looks from American schools—be it through relying on coaches or taking their recruitment into their own hands—some of the study participants grappled with challenges such as financial difficulties, time constraints, and deciding on scholarship offers. Considering the expenses of playing on club teams in addition to AAU teams and/or potential provincial or national teams, basketball ended up being quite expensive. On top of that, there were also costs for travel, accommodations, and entry fees. Parents often covered these fees, or coaches would help subsidize the costs. One participant tried to add up the costs of an AAU season and the impact it had on her experience:

I think the season itself cost just under eight- or nine-hundred dollars for the season, then you'd have to pay for the car trip, gas, and food. I remember at one tournament, I had just enough money to pay for gas and the hotel and 30 American dollars for the weekend for food. I literally ate the McDonald's \$1 menu the entire weekend.

Another participant shared how she depended on her network of support to help her pay for things: "I think financials [were an area of challenge]. It didn't completely hinder me, but if I didn't have the people in my life to help me out, I would not be able to play at the level I did when I couldn't afford it." For others, financial challenges came when it was time to prepare for the SATs, as they sought private support for their test preparation:

The money I put toward SATs was for tutoring because we don't have those [free] classes to prep students in Canada, like they do in the States. We have to pay to study the book, for somebody to teach us, then for the exam. That's something a lot of people don't know about the Canadian school system: if we want to go to the States, we have put the extra money into it.

Another participant shared how preparation for the test required financial sacrifices:

Every time I got a summer job in high school, it would go to [paying for the preparation of] my SATs. All the money that I would make would go back into my education. I couldn't spend that money on clothes or going out with friends. I knew I was sacrificing that and my friends for a bigger purpose.

Another participant identified the financial strain of the SATs:

[A barrier] was the SATs. When we were in high school, we didn't have those programs or classes for Canadian students to take those tests. We had to find our own means to then get the classes, buy the books, and then pay for those tests. So, I feel like PDSB [Peel District School Board] or whoever, didn't [support] the option of students going to the U.S. Especially because a lot of the students who wanted to go to the U.S. were athletes from lower economic backgrounds, so now we had to find that money to take that test to go and get that \$100,000 scholarship. It was definitely a disadvantage to us.

As discussed in Chapter 4, many of the participants did not receive academic support from their high schools in navigating this pathway and were on their own to figure out how to successfully tackle the SATs. Therefore, as mentioned earlier in discussing peer support, many participants shared some anxieties around the standardized test requirements, particularly because Canada does not use these tests for entry into post-secondary education, and the study participants did not receive support from their high schools. For some, the SATs were identified as a barrier because of its unfamiliarity.

One more difficulty that adversely affected the athletes' ability to prepare for the test was time constraints. One participant shared how the test preparation was challenging especially because of time constraints due to her busy schedule as a student-athlete:

That was the biggest test for me back then: prepping for my SATs, my ACTs, and not just passing, but getting a good score that would get me into a good university. It can be very difficult, being a student athlete, and people don't often understand that. They're just like: "You're an athlete, you are good, we need you for the school." It was never like that for me. I'm driving 4 hours away to play at a tournament, reading a book, and doing my homework on the way there, and finishing my tests online, you know? I still had to be a student in the same ways everyone else had to be and it was a lot harder, because I didn't have that luxury of doing it at a desk, table, or at home. I was doing it in a van driving to my next game. It's a lot harder and I feel that many don't understand that. They don't know how hard it is to be a student-athlete. They don't.

For many of the athletes, time constraints were a big challenge as they were juggling many different things and were being pulled in many different directions. The athletes had to not only navigate multiple educational systems, but also keep up with schoolwork, prepare and pay for the standardized testing, network, self-promote and market themselves, athletically train, play on at least three teams, and travel on those teams. Even with all of that effort, not all of the participants easily found success. For one participant who described herself as "not the greatest student" and who was

marginalized in classes for students with behavioural issues, basketball motivated her to push through school; however, she found difficulty juggling so many things. In her case, she had to retake the SAT and ACT and get tutors in order to succeed. While she eventually accepted a scholarship offer, in the process, she had to forfeit big offers to top schools.

Deciding on Scholarship Offers

Once the athletes got looks from American schools and completed their standardized testing (SAT or ACT), they then had to decide on which school and basketball program to choose. As mentioned earlier, coaches sometimes played an integral role in shaping the participants' decisions, but the rationales for the participants' school choice decisions were varied. Some simply wanted to be closer to home so that they could visit frequently, while others wanted to be as far away as possible in order to try living abroad and finding their independence. For yet others, it was all about finding balance between academics and athletics:

It was a combination of both, trying to find that balance, you know? You want a very good academic school so that when you graduate, it looks good on your resumé. Then you also want the athletic side. Do they have a good coach? Are these girls cool? It allows you to get a feel of what you are getting into, especially if you're going to be miles away from home.

For another participant, she weighed the school's interest in her by measuring their consistency in the recruitment process:

I wrote out a list of the pros and cons of what I wanted in a school and looked at the consistency of the school and then I just narrowed it down. Which schools are genuinely interested? I made a list of what's important to me, the teams in the schools that were very present, actively calling, very active in the recruitment process, and I went on visits to four schools. It was very difficult because, on my first school visit, I watched a practice, and they took me to the locker room and put a jersey in there for me. It was so exciting! I'm coming here! They took me to a restaurant, and I love Italian food, so they gave me Italian food. I [thought], "I will eat this every day if I come here!" I just went with where I felt most at home, then I called the coach to let him know I'm coming.

Other participants took a similar approach, finding ways to gauge interest and investment from the school. One participant noted that she wanted to go to a school where they wanted her more than

she wanted them and showed it in their actions:

My motto for a long time was I want to go somewhere where they want me more than I want them. With that being said, I would look out for the schools that would write me handwritten letters and not just another email that would copy and paste my name. I was looking for that and consistency, and I found that at one of the schools that contacted me in the eighth grade and stayed in touch until it was time for me to decide.

However, some schools would outwardly demonstrate their lack of enthusiasm towards recruits, which would result in a swift rejection of the scholarship offer:

They [NCAA DI school] weren't really the best team and their facilities were modest. The girls [potential teammates] didn't really seem like they cared whether I came or not, so they were like: "Are you going to come or not? Just let us know. We just want to know because if not, we'll stop trying."

This same participant had another similar experience at a top NCAA Division I school in the southern United States:

[The school] was cool, but the culture was completely different. I also noticed in the locker room that they wanted us [she and another recruit] in a packaged deal and they wrote that on a paper. So, they tell the team they have a recruit coming but, on the paper, they wrote: "We really want this point guard [the other recruit] and [participant] and not just [participant], or just the point guard." The focus wasn't [on me], but on getting the point guard and getting me after.

For others, choosing a school was also about fit in terms of the kind of city they wanted to live in, and many visited multiple schools to get a feel for them:

[NCAA school on the west coast], I remember how I felt toward each visit, and it's funny because you feel different dynamics, right? My host, she was just like: "I would never go so far away from school," and everyone was so prim and proper. It just really wasn't my vibe; there was a lot of different stuff on the visit.

One participant mentioned that a good fit was also about being part of a basketball program that offered the best opportunity to excel athletically:

I wanted to be a big fish in a small pond. I wanted to do the big major route and wanted to be part of a program that was new. Did they just win, or did they have history of not getting to the tournament [March Madness/National Championships]? I wanted to be part of something where it was like: "Okay, let's make some noise and go win a championship."

For some, it was as simple as being offered the most money: “I promise you, I chose, what was offering me the most money and the most decent education.” Another participant added: “I got three offers and picked the one that had the most money, the degree program I wanted to get into, and had a decent academic reputation.”

Another decision-making factor was that some participants were attracted to the option of the HBCU experience, which was unavailable to them in Canada and influenced their acceptance of their offers. One participant shared:

I went to the one where the city appealed to me the most because I knew from a lot of the people who had gone and come back that [location] was part of the problem. They were stuck, and everything was a million miles away from the school. My school was right in the middle [of the city], [so] no commute. It was also the only HBCU that reached out to me. That was appealing to me. It’s not that I didn’t want to be around a bunch of White people, but I felt that the [school] culture would be stronger, deeper, and a lot more interesting.

Another participant shared how a chance to have an HBCU experience was important to her and how much she learned from it:

[The school being an HBCU] was definitely a factor for me. I can say that going to an HBCU helped me a lot. It helped me learn my roots, about slavery, witnessing a plantation, but also, I learned that, in certain places, certain countries, I couldn’t cross or put my face there. I couldn’t go. [I learned that] that that still exists today, and a lot of people don’t know that.

Another participant compared and contrasted how her HBCU education was different from the Canadian education she experienced:

It was totally different; they’d teach you things that mattered, things you needed to know. Your history, things that made you think critically. School here [in Canada] has an agenda. They don’t want you to think critically and be hip to what the hell is going on, you know? You’re left trying to figure who they are trying to say you are. You aren’t given any kind of tools to [figure out why] you are the way you are, and there’s a reason for it and no, you’re not crazy. What you think is going on is going on. When I started going to school here [in Canada], they put me in ESL. For the life of me, I do not know a second language.

In the passage above, the participant described how her Canadian education othered her, as a child and Caribbean migrant, by putting her in ESL, despite English being her first language. In addition, throughout her recalling of her university experience at an HBCU, she often mentioned

how that experience taught her so much about herself, her Black identity, and the African diaspora, instilling a strong sense of self. For some participants, the exposure and access to this type of learning environment was important to them and greatly shaped their decisions to attend, especially since HBCUs were not an option for them in the Canadian context at all.

Importantly, while many participants were very clear about how they would go about choosing a school, some succumbed to pressure to choose out of fear that they would not secure other offers, financial pressures, coach pressures, and even pressure from their parents. These pressures led some participants to make commitments to scholarships offers that, in hindsight, may not have been the best decision. One participant shared how, because her parents knew nothing about basketball and the athletic scholarship process, she felt pressured by the coaching staff to make a premature decision on the spot. She was also fearful that, if she did not accept the offer, she may not get any others. Another participant retrospectively shared how she felt pressure to accept an offer before weighing and considering her options:

I would have taken a different path, leaving my options open and not feeling like my decision was something I was pressured into [in reference to an offer at an NCAA DI school offer in the Northeast]. I would have waited; I would have weighed my options to see different schools and go on different visits. I would [have liked the chance to] have seen what the best fit for me was. I also would have asked more questions to get more information about what it is to play in the States.

In the end, all the participants accepted offers at schools all over the United States, which included junior colleges, small 4-year colleges, state universities, and private colleges and universities including HBCUs. However, the factors that shaped how they chose which institutions to attend varied widely, including balancing academics and athletics, institutional interest and investment, proximity to home, finances, access to the HBCU experience, and, sometimes, pressure from schools, coaches, or parents.

Discussion

The findings in this chapter reveal several important aspects related to the experiences, challenges, and outcomes of the athletes during the *getting looks* phase of their basketball careers. Firstly, in order to accomplish their scholarship goals, the athletes developed a hyper-focus on basketball. This was evidenced by their heavy participation through playing on multiple teams and developing multiple support systems to gain knowledge and facilitate athletic and academic success. This hyper-focus was very time-consuming and sometimes expensive, which contradicts many of Bordieuan arguments that sport choice is heavily informed by class in part due to the affordability, easy access, and lower equipment needs. While some argue that the immense time and money investments from parents are needed to excel in sports like soccer, lacrosse, and rowing, which have seen the greatest gains in participation of females overall and often act as barrier for Black female athletes (L. Smith, 2007), the findings in this study reveal that basketball can be just as demanding financially and time-wise.

Indeed, the interviewed athletes had to pay fees for club, AAU, development, provincial and/or national teams; showcase registration, transportation to and from practices and local games, distant travel within Canada and the U.S., accommodations, uniforms, shoes, gym bags, athletic gear, and potentially preparatory school (if they did not qualify for funding). As evidenced through the experiences of the athletes in this study, playing on multiple teams was costly. These fees can vary widely and run from hundreds to thousands of dollars, and sometimes in one sitting. While these fees may be dispersed over time, they can add up and, for athletes playing at high levels of competition with hopes of securing scholarship offers, the pursuit can be expensive.

Research shows that, in recent years, there has been a shift towards a professionalization of youth sport (Adams & Johnston, 2018; Brower, 1979; Gould, 2009; Gould & Carson, 2004; Watchman & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2017; Wearing, Swan, & Neil, 2010). Specifically, Adams and Johnston (2018) argue that the trend of professionalization of youth sports like basketball through

the rise of AAU, club teams, and preparatory schools as pathways to scholarship opportunities, create a deluge of for-profit options, which can be quite expensive and poorly vetted. These teams can be quite demanding and, as described by the participants, require year-long training and development through multiple avenues. In addition to financial costs, these players also make huge time commitments to basketball on top of any domestic responsibilities, which, in effect, turns basketball into a *full-time job* that may or may not reap a return on investment. Therefore, while, discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 4, class and race dispositions through socialization processes, such as role models and media influence, attract Black youth to basketball and may repel them from engaging with other sports, the findings in this chapter suggest that basketball can end up being just as expensive as other sports, and, unknowingly, the financial ability to pay for all that comes with competitive basketball can also act as an access barrier to high levels of play.

Secondly, these circumstances make athletes vulnerable, particularly to their coaches, as the need to see a return on their time and financial investment intensifies. As became clear in the interview data, while many athletes had great experiences with their coaches, others did not, and these negative experiences sometimes resulted in exploitation and poor decisions being made on their behalf. Accordingly, the athletes whose parents may have been more hands-off for several reasons, such as needing to work, were left at the mercy of the worldview of the coaches, putting them at risk of being exploited or misled like the athlete who passed up an HBCU she wanted to attend due to her coaches' biases.

Examples like this speak to the potential precariousness of this pathway because, while 40% of the athletes (see Figure 8) did not transfer institutions at all, 60% transferred up to five times to complete their undergraduate degrees. While the reasons for the transfers varied (see Chapter 6 for further discussion), these transfers can be time-consuming and a financial liability if playing eligibility runs out for the players (2-5 years in the United States and Canada depending on the

governing body), as players may eventually (and did) have to pay out pocket. As revealed by the participants, some less trustworthy coaches placed players in schools that were not in their best interest to get kickbacks, resulting in players' having to transfer in order to get themselves in a better basketball environment, and to also afford themselves an opportunity to earn a degree. In these ways, the athletes in this study faced the risk of exploitation in their crafting of pathways to American universities.

Thirdly, given the ways in which the participants successfully navigated their pathways to university, in addition to aspirational capital, as discussed in Chapter 4, the athletes demonstrated their possession of navigational, familial, and social capital. Navigational capital refers to the "ability to maneuver through institutions not created with communities of color in mind" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). In this case, the exclusionary institutions are formal educational spaces, which, as discussed in Chapter 4, can be oppressive environments for Black students. While the athletes in this study successfully navigated through multiple educational and athletic institutions in order to attract American scholarships, this navigation largely depended on their social capital or informal networks of support, which Yosso (2005) describes as the "networks of people and community resources" (p. 79).

These informal networks of support created by the athletes were intricate networks of family, peers, and coaches serving as vital resources to draw on for emotional support, advice, and knowledge (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015). Through this network, the athletes created pathways to universities through depending on their social network to help them navigate scholarship offers, decide which teams to play for, which coaches to be trained by, and how to cover costs. In so doing, the athletes demonstrated their abundance of familial capital, which refers to the ways in which marginalized communities commit to collective well-being by expanding kinship beyond blood relation and fostering a collective consciousness that connects members and

informs “emotional, moral, educational ,and occupational consciousness” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) . This is evidenced by how the participants referred to their basketball peers and coaches as an extended family, circle, or their “core.” This basketball family, although not blood-related, shared a collective consciousness that informed their educational and athletic aspirations and served as an ongoing resource and support system.

Fourthly, in drawing on these forms of capital, the participants demonstrated their leadership skills, ingenuity, high level of focus, maturity, perseverance, and commitment, particularly as it relates to their aspirational capital, given their ability to stay committed to their goals and how much they juggled despite the odds and barriers, especially at such young ages. This was evidenced by their willingness to make sacrifices (e.g., using income from part-time jobs for SAT prep courses), the complex decision-making processes they underwent, and the extent they went to reach their goals (e.g., making game tape and crafting letters of interest and athletic resumes for prospective universities to be sent via traditional mail, which required finding the correct contacts and mailing address of institutions in a different country).

However, this extraordinary effort reflects socialization patterns that instruct Black youth to work exponentially harder than the dominant group to get even half the recognition. This adage about work ethic is common in diasporic Black groups (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fries-Britt, 1998; Mabry, 2008; Sanders, 1997), reflecting how race affects the exchange rate of human capital—that is, how Black people who possess forms of capital often have their capital devalued, ignored, or misidentified, requiring exponential amounts of effort to yield similar results to that of the dominant group. The fact that, in order to access university in affordable and meaningful ways, these athletes felt that taking on what amounts to an athletic full-time job was necessary, in addition to developing extensive social networks and navigating multiple athletic and academic institutions in Canada and in the United

States during their pre-teen and teen years, aptly demonstrates the additional labour required in order to be successful. It also speaks to the participants' perceptions of their chances to achieve similar things relying solely on traditional academic pathways.

This need to create divergent pathways and invoking aspirational, social, familial, and navigational capitals to circumvent racial barriers has historical, ethnic, and cultural roots. For example, in many Caribbean and Continental African diasporic communities, when in need, groups frequently engage in what is called *susu*, derived from the Yoruba term *esusu*, a micro-financial practice rooted in Nigerian communities dating back as far as the 16th century (Bascom, 1952; Mtshali, 2017; Seibel, 2004). This practice was most likely transported to the Caribbean through the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Bascom, 1952; Mtshali, 2017; Seibel, 2004) and, as a result, can take on many diasporic forms. *Susu* "is a fund to which a group of individuals make fixed contributions of money at fixed intervals; the total amount contributed by the entire group is assigned to each of the members in rotation" (Bascom, 1952, p. 63) *Sususes* can be used to "to start businesses, others for big purchases, vacations, down payments on properties and cars, and even to send kids to college" (Mtshali, 2017).

This practice offers diasporans opportunities and access to funds to accomplish an array of goals, by relying on the informal development of a like-minded network to support various personal endeavours. This practice can also help those who are facing economic difficulty or who cannot secure funds in traditional ways (bank loans) and need alternative pathways to secure funding. While divergent pathways like these can yield success, as discussed in this chapter, they come with additional risk and pressures. Like basketball as a pathway to university, *sususes* expose members of the group to increased risk, because a member could be unscrupulous (like a coach) and exploit the other members, making trust and wisely choosing your community members imperative. In addition, *sususes* like athletic scholarships can also reflect how marginalized communities have to function as

outsiders, working harder to accomplish similar goals, which includes the labour of creating and maintaining divergent pathways to gain access to the same opportunities as other groups. Therefore, the need for these divergent pathways can reflect patterns of exclusion rooted in the incongruence between the capitals possessed by racialized groups and that of the dominant group and reflect historical scripts of Black exclusion.

Finally, the creation and use of these extraordinary efforts also reflect the participants' strong desire and commitment to accessing opportunities and autonomy. While the athletes refer to financial barriers to university, many also expressed a desire for meaningful, challenging, exciting opportunities and futures. The sheer level of work it took these athletes to get scholarship offers is not only about accessing university or avoiding debt, but also about putting oneself in the position to choose and refuse. As revealed in this chapter, the athletes were courted by prestigious Ivy League and historically Black institutions. It is through basketball that the athletes were afforded additional access to educational options that, as discussed in Chapter 4, traditional academic pathways were not offering, despite high achievement in many of the athletes. Therefore, this divergent pathway not only offered a free education through sport, but also a sense of control over their academic and athletic futures and the possibility of being in the position to explore numerous diverse and exciting post-secondary opportunities.

Chapter 6: Defining “Making It” for Black Female GTA Ballers

The highly complex and diverse pathways constructed and taken by the participants in this study also provide insight into the diverse ways that they thought about *making it* as Black Canadian female athletes. Many of the participants stated that making it could be understood as many different things based on their individual goals. This chapter explores: 1) how making it often entailed leaving Canada; 2) how and why America was often constructed as a better space to thrive; and 3) the benefits and drawbacks of the U.S. athletic scholarship pathway to university.

“Canada Ain’t It”

As discussed in Chapter 4, a key motivator for many of the participants was securing access to a university education from an American institution through getting a look from a Division I school and without having to take on debt. For some of the interviewees, getting a look and accepting it was enough to have made it. For others, securing a university education and avoiding student loans were only side benefits; for them, making it was also about getting as far as they could athletically and academically, capitalizing on the opportunities put before them. At the very least, this capitalization included getting an undergraduate degree and at the most, a graduate degree or a professional playing career. However, a key emergent theme was that the vast majority of participants strongly felt that immigration to America was a necessary step to their academic and athletic success. Many believed this because of preconceived notions, a belief that Canada did not offer similar opportunities, or a general unawareness of what Canada could offer them athletically and academically. While, in retrospect, some participants eventually learned what Canada could offer, many others still felt that the United States was a better gateway to opportunities.

“It’s Just Better”

From very early on, some of the athletes perceived the American landscape as simply being better and more competitive. They developed these perceptions from their interactions as teens with

American players through their club and AAU teams, as well as through watching American basketball (both men and women's) on television, which intrigued and inspired them. Early in their basketball careers, the participants gained some awareness of the idea that American basketball was of a higher caliber. One player recalled how she perceived the American landscape because of early encounters with American players: "When you go to the States, girls look at you and are like, 'you ain't nothing.' You're Canadian, you're nothing." Other players expressed similar sentiments about how they felt they were perceived by American players. One player shared how her experience on pre-university travelling teams (AAU), shaped her perception of the American landscape:

I don't know, maybe by going to the tournaments and seeing the quality of players that they were producing at the high school level? Maybe just seeing that, I assumed [America was better], because when I was in high school, they were above and beyond our teams. They were all-stars, and you go to them and you're like: "Gosh! How do you?! Are you human?!"

For others, their perspectives were perceived as programming, as they were inundated with messages from coaches and athletic peers that if they wanted play basketball seriously, they had to go to America. After completing their scholarships, many players confirmed that the American athletic landscape was indeed the "big leagues," as they felt that the universities put much more resources into their athletes, athletic development, and athletic programs. One of the participants shared her perspective, comparing Canadian athletic programs to American ones as follows:

They put more money into it. They definitely embraced [sports] more, whereas for us [in Canada], they just see it as something we like to do in school. For example, with the cutbacks in the curriculum that one year; no sports?! I don't think that would happen in certain places in America. Although it could...but at the schools that I was in? Nah, that would not happen. And how can we have such [a small number of games] at school?

Here, the participant refers to the labour disruptions that occurred in the late 1990s in response to sweeping cuts to education by a newly elected Mike Harris-led Conservative government in the province of Ontario. As a result, sports programs and extracurricular activities in public schools were cancelled for the academic year across the province. The participant suggested

that a cancellation of sports would never happen in the U.S. because of how seriously she saw that they take sports. She argued that, unlike Canada, sports are not seen as an extra in school, but rather an essential part. In addition, the participant brought attention to the fact that the girls' basketball season through OFSAA, which governs public and Catholic school sports, is relatively short and uneventful, whereas, to her knowledge, high school basketball seasons in the United States for girls are much longer and more intensive.

Along with longer and more intensive high school play, part of the perception of the athletic landscape in the United States being seen as superior to Canada's was that, in retrospect, many of the participants felt that the kind of athletic training, development, and preparation that American athletes received far exceeded anything they could receive in Canada. One participant noted that the level of competition was unlike anything she would have encountered in Canada:

I've gotten to play with some of the best women basketball players in the world, and I never would've had that opportunity playing at a Canadian university. Just playing in the States has elevated my game on a different level. There's way more competition and talent in the U.S.

Another participant hypothesized that what makes American athletes better earlier in their careers is the early and intensive training. Comparing with her own experience, she felt that the training she received in Canada was inferior:

I'm learning a proper jump shot and form in high school and they're [Americans] doing that since the 6th and 7th grade! The foundation of the sport is just way better for kids. Also, waking up and running on the track, they have conditioning in high school, and I didn't do that until university. So, the foundations of the game, they are way more advanced. They start their kids younger, with us learning [the same things] 10 years later.

Here, the participant observed that she learned key basketball skills and participated in more intensive workouts way later than her American counterparts. Another participant echoed these sentiments about training:

I think the way they condition their student-athletes, is why some of the best basketball athletes come from the States. They call them student-athletes, but really athletics are number one. They push training way more than the school [part] because they know it makes more money.

Again, the intensity of training was emphasized, and the participant highlighted how the “athlete” part of student-athlete actually takes precedence. One athlete noticed a dramatic increase in the level of competition once she began playing in the United States on a scholarship:

Just the intensity! The level of competition went up drastically, so you had to be on your game every day. When playing rep [club] basketball in Scarborough or Toronto, I’m the best on the court, but in the States, we’re all the best. So, it’s like, who’s going to prevail to be number one out of 12 great basketball players from all over the country on one team? It just elevates your game to another level.

Another participant shared a similar perspective on the fact that athletics takes precedence over academics:

The culture of sports in the U.S. in general is crazy. As I’m sure you can imagine especially college sports and alumni are always very active supporters, and students are also always supportive as well. The culture is different. To be quite honest, they take it a lot more seriously than their academics.

One athlete encompassed what many of the participants shared, that Canada simply does not invest enough in sports, resulting in elite athletes’ needing to leave in order to get to the next level:

I feel like it’s just because we don’t invest enough money or time into our athletes to develop them. It’s evident when you look at these other countries with America with 130 medals, while we only have 30. It’s crazy when you look at things and as much as we laugh, it’s not even funny. Why can’t we invest in our athletes to be the best and the greatest?

For those with professional play in mind, collegiate play in the United States was essential.

One player described how, playing in America prepared her for the professional stage:

If you’re a good athlete, over and across the border is where you should be going. I think it was necessary for me to go to experience playing at a Division I. It’s also important because as a professional athlete, Canadian schools aren’t recognized. [An American school] holds more weight over there and people don’t really want to take risks or chances on players unless they know they’re good, so having the opportunity to say [that you went to a] Division I, really builds your resume.

Therefore, many of the athletes interviewed in the study perceived leaving Canada to go to the United States as a necessary step because of the more intensive sport culture, superior training, and stronger athletic reputation, which could support their professional athletic aspirations.

“If I’m Going Anywhere, I’m Going to Make Sure Everything Is Taken Care Of”

Further contributing to the belief that America was athletically superior to Canada was many athletes’ perception that Canadian schools simply did not offer anywhere near the same athletic and financial opportunities as the United States. One participant shared her perspective on how going to the U.S. was necessary for her athletic growth:

I think it was necessary for my growth as an athlete. I don’t know if Canadians are offered scholarships. I think very, very few Canadian programs did that. I just knew that if I wanted to get better and have the full collegiate basketball player experience, the States was the next step. It’s no secret that Americans are super-human athletes. They have the best training, facilities, funding, and resources, so at the time, I was like: “This is what I’m doing, I’m going to go.”

When asked why they did not stay in Canada to play in USports (formerly the CIS), many participants admitted that they knew very little about athletic scholarship opportunities in Canada and, if they did know about them, they were more concerned about the level of competition available in Canada as compared to America. One player shared how she felt that she would not have had as fulfilling of an experience:

I think I could have stayed in Canada and would have gotten a bigger name, huge, but the experience wouldn’t have been the same. I’m a better player because I played with better and the highest-ranked players in the nation. Like drafts, broke records, and conferences. I feel like it wouldn’t have been the same effect here.

Another athlete felt that, if she had stayed, she would have missed out on many elements of the American collegiate experience not available in Canada:

It definitely wouldn’t be the same experience. Definitely not in regard to level of play at that time and the university experience. Having fraternities and sororities and to travel on planes to go and play against big-name universities that were always heard of and to have thousands of fans [in the stands]? I could’ve never gotten those types of experiences had I attended a Canadian university.

Another participant, in reminiscing on her recruitment time, described the Canadian athletic landscape as compared to the American one as “two different worlds” in terms of the level of

competition and financial support. For the participants who were open to Canadian schools, they were often disappointed by the offers received:

I still applied for Canadian universities, but they basically wanted me to play and go to the university and maybe get some money here and there, but not [directly] pay for my school. The best offer was from a community college. They were willing to pay half of my tuition, but I'd still be out of province, so I'd then have to scrape up [additional money for room and board]. There was no money and [after all] the hard work I put in; I wanted my offer to reflect that. So, for me, I felt like the best thing was to leave Canada.

Another participant shared her experience with Canadian athletic offers, noting that the level of financial support was not the same:

When I was looking at schools, there weren't Canadian scholarships for athletes. So, going to the U.S. was the only option in terms of me and my family. I honestly believe that, if Canadian universities offered full athletic scholarships for men and women, way more Canadian athletes [would be] staying home. The fact is that it was not an option for us, we had to go to America.

One participant asserted that she would have considered staying in Canada if they actually gave her a decent offer:

I got a few offers [names a number of Ontario universities and colleges], but you're not giving a full scholarship? Nope, I can't come. I can't pay for it. They were partial. They were like: "We can do this much athletic and some of this academic if you get your grades up, and then we'll get you some." Like, they were trying to find ways to pay for it and it wasn't organized. You're not telling me this is what you're going to do. This is what they're saying they *might* be able to do.

Among the athletes who received offers from Canadian schools, especially those in Ontario, many shared that those offers were not streamlined packages with assurances of what they could expect to have cover their expenses during their four years of study. Instead, it was a random mix of bursaries and small scholarships, with promises of future potential monies that would often amount to half of their tuition, at most. Other offers that included tuition coverage offered no funds for room, board, and meals. Given that many of these schools were entirely outside of the GTA or Ontario, the athletes would incur additional expenses for room and board. While a small number of athletes posited that Ontario itself did not offer scholarships and other provinces did, they felt that they were

not adequately aware of these options or that the options were not worth it. One participant asked, “Why would I go so far away from home and not have everything covered?” Unsurprisingly, the athletes concluded that playing in the United States was a superior option.

Benefits of the Scholarship Pathways

In pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarships, in order to *make* it, the participants also clearly identified benefits to this pathway to university. When prompted, the participants enthusiastically recalled numerous personal and identity building benefits to their experiences that went beyond getting a free undergraduate and sometimes graduate education. Almost all the athletes identified how basketball was an invaluable tool in their personal development. Furthermore, many stated that basketball helped them to develop mental toughness, resilience, and the ability to think on their feet and solve problems in stressful situations. Others pointed out that the rigorous schedule of playing for multiple teams while balancing school, further individual training, family responsibilities, schoolwork, and sometimes a part-time job taught them to effectively manage their time and become masters of self-discipline. These experiences of juggling also taught many of the athletes to manage stress and frustration through physical activity, with many citing basketball as a key tool for the development of healthy coping mechanisms. In addition, the participants praised the ways in which basketball developed their navigational, leadership, and social skills as the players often had to advocate for themselves, support teammates, and liaise with university personnel at young ages.

Many of the benefits mentioned by the participants were also social, as many athletes shared that playing on so many teams, with similar aged peers with similar goals and interests, made them have a built-in social group. Even for the athletes who were shyer or more reserved, during their middle and high school years, they could usually count on their teammates for friendship and support. These experiences built confidence in many of the participants and, in these varied ways, basketball provided the participants with enormous personal and social benefits. One participant

mentioned that, without the experience of playing competitive basketball and more specifically, going away to school for it, she would have been a totally different person:

I think I'd be a different person. My coping mechanisms would be different, because you grow so much as a person when you don't have anyone to rely on if that makes sense. When you're outside of your comfort zone, you are able to hone different skills. I had to operate with integrity, while making the right decisions without people telling me what to do. I think that if I stayed home, that's exactly what would happen [she wouldn't have had the chance to develop in those ways].

Academic Benefits

In addition to the aforementioned athletic, personal, and social benefits, competitive basketball also provided the participants with academic benefits that went beyond scholarship opportunities. As mentioned in previous chapters, many of the participants were high-achieving ambitious students and, while many shared that they were intrinsically motivated to do well academically, not all of the participants enjoyed their learning experiences in high school. Basketball motivated some of the athletes to stay focused on school. As discussed previously in Chapter 2, Black GTA students often face many educational challenges such as Eurocentrism and the lack of culturally relevant curriculum. One participant was very overt about her schooling experiences pre-university in the GTA, arguing that: "I think even at that age in high school, I don't know, I felt like the teachers looked down on us as young Black kids. That was the experience that I had from the time I started schooling in Canada." For some students, this resulted in the lack of engagement with their schoolwork. Some participants mentioned feeling bored with school:

I don't think it was that basketball's more important or that sport overtook everything, it's that I just didn't really care about the stuff that we were doing. [I had] no interest. I didn't have an interest in those subjects (history, economics, and math). I really enjoyed English, though. The classes that I enjoyed, I did better in, but the ones that I didn't really care for? I didn't put much effort into them. I have a hard time doing stuff that I have no interest in doing.

Another athlete shared her experience with school:

I'd say I did pretty well, 80s student, but I often found myself a little bit bored with school. I feel like my effort wasn't always there and I procrastinated a lot. It was just NOT interesting for me at all. I felt like: "why do I have to read this textbook and then just tell you what was in it? Just go look yourself!" [laughs] It just wasn't interesting for me.

Therefore, basketball helped many stay the course and, sometimes, offered them more supports than the average student in both high school and university. While some educators were indifferent to their status as scholarship athletes, others were very supportive, which made for a more nurturing educational experience, making it easier for those students to do well. One participant shared how once scholarship offers poured in exponentially in the 11th grade, she began taking school more seriously and started getting more support from teachers: "My grades started going up, and I was getting way more help from the teachers. They saw that I wasn't goofing off or skipping class and actually going to class. I was gaining that respect, and my grades were getting so much better."

However, many of the participants- especially those who attended HBCUs (see Chapter 5)—mentioned that they enjoyed their university experiences much better, which they found much more engaging, critical, and relevant to their lived experiences. Interestingly, many of the athletes had even stronger performance at university. During their undergraduate years of study, half of the participants shared that they made the dean's list at their respective universities. While the grade point average required for the dean's list varies among institutions, at the very least, this should be understood as a marker of high academic achievement at university. When asked about academic performance during their undergraduate years, the participants also demonstrated that it was fairly strong, with 60% in the A+ to A- range and 40% in the B+ to B- range.

Being on a scholarship also provided the athletes with additional supports that facilitated strong academic performance at university. Many of the athletes shared that, as part of their schedules at their respective universities, they had an allotted study time, usually in the evenings after practice. During the week, the team would have their own dedicated study space or "study

hall,” and they were expected to focus on their schoolwork. Some athletes mentioned that there were also tutors available during the study period, and the enforcement of study hall varied. For some athletes, study hall was mandatory, while for others, it was mandatory only in the first year, or after they proved a certain amount of academic consistency. Other teams simply had a set number of hours (approximately 20) to be completed by the athletes in a week, and they would sign in and out. While the duration of a study hall session varied, it could have been as long as three hours per day. One athlete shared how she felt she tried harder at university as compared to high school:

I made it a priority to do well. I didn't try in high school, but I tried in university. I made the Dean's list and President's list. I started getting academic awards. It was good because unless you had practice time, [studying] was implemented where you had no choice and in those two hours, everybody's in there doing work.

Another participant shared how her academic performance also improved at university:

I think I should have done better in [high] school, but I honestly just did enough to make sure I could play sports. When I got to college, I changed my act. I was on Dean's list every semester and graduated with honors. I changed and fixed my attitude, you know? This could be my life later on, so I need to make sure I did well. In high school, I'd do just enough that they don't kick me off the team.

One athlete called the infrastructure of her basketball scholarship, her “saving grace”:

It helped me! It made me have to do well because if I get bored or I'm not interested, it's not happening, you know? I don't know how motivated I would have been in school if basketball wasn't involved. Like even in grad school, I did well because, at that point, I think I was conditioned to be. I was conditioned to do well. But when I think of basketball, I feel that it was my saving grace.

Overall, competitive basketball, particularly in collegiate settings, helped to support the athletes' academic success, regardless of whether they were already self-motivated and high-achieving or became such later on. Additional supports coupled with a need to maintain eligibility created a collaborative space to support the students academically. Beyond undergraduate study, basketball also afforded the participants with more opportunities for graduate study beyond their high grades. Some athletes were made aware of opportunities for graduate study through coaching opportunities and assistantships, which allowed them to work as part of the coaching staff and cover

their educational and living expenses for graduate school. These opportunities also motivated some of the participants to academically achieve in order to gain admission to the graduate programs of their choice and without incurring any additional expense.

Drawbacks, Risks, and Sacrifices

Despite the many personal, social, and academic benefits that the athletes gained in their competitive basketball pathways to university, the participants had to balance these benefits with some drawbacks, risks, and sacrifices. For example, many participants shared that, in their first year abroad, they struggled with homesickness as they missed their family, friends, and comforts. One participant shared her experience of being homesick, which persisted beyond her first year, as she was still playing professionally: “I was only 17 at the time, so I was nervous about going across the border and being hours away. It was a lot to be away from home. Even now, I’m homesick. I miss my home and family.”

Transfers and Their Implications

Another drawback experienced by the athletes was the fact that teams did not always work out despite their best efforts to be discerning. Sometimes, players simply ended up on teams where their expectations did not match reality, and some experienced bullying and ill treatment, which prompted early exits and transfers. For instance, one participant shared how she did not fit in with her teammates, which prompted a school transfer:

I think it was because I was Canadian. I was a relatively good student. I spoke properly and differently than they did. I looked different from them and had different experiences. I didn’t pay attention to whatever they had going on and they always tried to drag me into their ridiculousness. They would fight girls on campus and would fight each other! I’m not taking part in this! So, it was just a hot ass mess. It was pretty crazy.

For other participants, it was not always just the players that were a mismatch, but rather the coaches. One participant shared how she felt ill-treated by her coach, which also prompted a school transfer:

Basically, I was bullied. It sounds silly, but they tried to toughen me up. I've always been a finesse type player; I've never been the nitty gritty on the floor type of player, which is something I wanted to work on. I didn't want people to push me to toughen up. That's what they did and pushed me and pushed me, to the point where they pushed me away. They did bully me, and the coach was always so hard on me, and it was to the point where it was on the court. For example, someone says they're sick and the coaches will say: "alright...go rest, go in your room". If I was sick, they're like "take a bucket and go sit on the sidelines." It was completely unfair. I tried figuring out what made them treat me this way. I think they tried toughening me up and just went about it the wrong way.

She described how she felt well-liked on the team and the coaches always chose her to host incoming recruits; however, things turned sour one time she was ill and declined to host a recruit. She continued:

They were hosting a recruit and I was still recovering, and I had a lot of work to catch up on. They told me I was ungrateful, and that I didn't appreciate the 50k they paid for me. Meanwhile, when my roommate said she didn't want to do it, they were like: "Alright cool" and moved on. I just didn't understand why they treated me that way. The dynamics on and off the court were just crazy. Even on the court, we had a conditioning session one morning, and we had to run a certain distance of sprints around the track in a certain time. If we didn't, it didn't count. It was like 15 laps or something crazy. My group wasn't making the time, so the trainer was like: "Half of you have to make it, not all at a time." So, we decide to run in shifts, but people still weren't making the time, so I decided to run and make the time for the group. It was, like 6 a.m., [and I hadn't eaten much because were up since 5] and I ended up fainting. I got lightheaded, dizzy, and passed out. After I got up, the coach was like: "Are you okay?" and I say, "I think so," and he's like, "Finish up."

The athlete then had to finish off the running set. There were other instances where they pushed her body too far, which resulted in a severe injury. After several more negative experiences, the participant had had enough:

I was a starter and had one of my best games before I left. In the practices, the coach would call fouls and one time, someone closed the shit out of me, and he didn't say anything. Nothing was done. There was a practice and where a girl closed her fist and punched me in the face, and I had a bloody nose. She didn't go for the ball; she just literally punched me in the face. I had a mild concussion [and the reaction was]: "You have a bloody nose, you're good!" It was like: "Brush it off." I was like: "You know what? This is abuse. I'm over this." So, I went home for Christmas and never went back. I told my coach, and he was so surprised; he couldn't believe it. He didn't see it coming.

The ongoing lack of empathy and differential treatment made the participant feel undervalued and ultimately contributed to her decision to leave the team and seek a transfer to

another school. While these experiences are more extreme, they contribute to the reasons why 60% of the athletes transferred schools at least once (see Figure 8). While some athletes transferred because of poor fit with teams, coaches, or ill-treatment, others transferred due to the closing of schools/basketball programs or to accept better opportunities at other schools. However, given that players only had a set number of years of eligibility in the United States and Canada depending on the governing body they were playing for, they had to carefully choose where to go, when, and how.

In addition, depending on the circumstances, schools, and governing bodies involved, the athletes would sometimes have to sit out for a year to be allowed to continue to play. The median number of transfers for the participants in this study was two, with eight participants not transferring at all, and five being the highest number of transfers (see Figure 8). In addition, for the students who transferred, their credits were sometimes not recognized or only partially recognized by their new institutions, resulting in the participants' losing time and taking longer to obtain their degrees. For a small number of players, this resulted in their running out of eligibility years and having to pay out of pocket for the latter years of their undergraduate degrees. This required some to take on part-time work or loans to finish their undergraduate study.

Injuries and Training Intensity

Another drawback experienced by the participants was the risk of injury. Many athletes shared their experiences with athletic injuries during their playing careers. Some injuries like ankle or finger sprains were more acute, while others were more severe and required long-term rehabilitation. For example, one athlete broke her ankle and had to relearn how to walk. This injury derailed her basketball career, as she had to heal, relearn how to walk, get back into shape, and then restart the recruitment process after already completing seasons in the United States. Others experienced knee and back injuries, which caused them to lose months of playing time, experience

long-term and chronic pain, or resulted in the end of their playing careers altogether. In total, 14 out of 20 athletes reported experiencing injuries, whether acute or major, throughout their playing careers.

Some players were simply exhausted by the end of the process, with one participant likening American collegiate basketball to a “full-time job, with part-time school.” She provided the following account of her experience:

I didn’t think it would be as much work, but it’s a full-time job. Canada’s nothing in comparison to the States. Like our focus here is that we’re more academically sound than they are. They are die-hard sports fans over there. I wasn’t expecting that, but it was more sink or swim. You can’t let them watch you drown because they’re all going to laugh at you.

Although the experiences varied from school to school, the athletes generally followed very stringent and intense schedules at their collegiate institutions. Figure 10 shows a composite mock schedule of what the pre-season could look like for a collegiate basketball athlete:

Time	Activity
Morning	Wake up (as early as 4 a.m.) Track workouts Classes Team practice
Afternoon	Team and individual workouts (based on playing positions) Strength and conditioning (weight training, etc.) Classes
Evening	Team practice Study hall

Figure 10. Pre-Season mock composite schedule

Many of the participants asserted that, due to the intensity of their physical conditioning and training, as well as the frequency of the workouts, the pre-season was more demanding on their time and bodies. Pre-season training would begin in August and go until the season would begin in the mid-fall. Once the regular season began, the schedules of the athletes would change and continue until the end of the season, which was usually in early spring. Within the season, the schedule could look as shown in Figure 11.

Time	Activity
Morning	Wake up (as early as 6 a.m.) Team practice Classes
Afternoon	Team and individual workouts (based on playing positions) Strength and conditioning (weight training, etc.) Classes
Evening	Team practice Study hall

Figure 11. In-season mock composite schedule

It should be noted that the athletes' schedules varied widely based on whether they were attending an NCAA, NAIA, or NJCAA institution, the division they were part of, and differences in coaching style and approach. In addition, the activities shown in Figures 10 and 11 reflect possible activities. Depending on the stringency of the athletes' program, they would participate in all of these activities in a typical day, or just some. For example, some athletes did not have morning classes scheduled, so they would often use that time to catch up on sleep. Most of the athletes reported that the workouts were often less frequent in the regular playing season to a maximum of two practices a day. On game days, for some teams, the practices would be swapped for the game. On the weekends, some teams would have a later wake up time of maybe 8 a.m., but would still have morning and afternoon practices, while other teams had no practices at all on weekends and some just had soft practices or "walkthroughs." The team practices typically ran from 90 to 120 minutes. The schedules shown in Figures 10 and 11 do not include physiotherapy treatments, which many teams incorporated as an ongoing therapy for athletes, time for sleep, socialization, contact with family back home, and meals, and so forth.

For some of the athletes, towards the end of their collegiate careers, they were simply "over it." One athlete, who endured several institutional transfers, expressed that towards the end of her scholarship; she began looking forward to a time where she could just do "nothing" and shared

that she felt burnt out. Other athletes expressed mental and physical exhaustion and a readiness to move on with their lives. For others, as mentioned earlier, injuries led them to stop playing.

Social and Emotional Sacrifices

In addition to balancing benefits with drawbacks and risks, in order to *make it*, the participants also had to make a lot of social sacrifices. Many participants described that they often missed out on socializing opportunities because they were so busy with basketball. One participant noted that her non-athlete friends sometimes simply did not understand her lifestyle:

I had friends growing up and in high school that I don't hang out with as much now, just because they didn't understand my lifestyle and why I was never there and why I could never come to any of their things. Some of them understood, so I do still speak to them, but maybe not hang out as much because we just haven't built that relationship over time. I would say the majority of my really good friends are still old teammates. Those are where all my true friendships really lie.

Many of the participants echoed these sentiments, stating that most of their closest friends were also former teammates. Another participant shared her experience with maintaining friendships with non-athlete friends:

I lost touch with a lot of people, especially the high school people. I had a clique, a crew and to this day, we don't speak. It's mostly my fault because I have a bad out of sight, out of mind thing and for me, it was tough because college is like a full-time job! College alone is a full-time job, then you're playing basketball? You've got two full-time jobs! It's hard to pick up the phone and call every single friend. My mom would call me, and she would not let me not keep in touch with her, you know? So, that was there and then the basketball world, the people I was cool with, we always saw each other in the summer and that helped because everybody came home from school, and we'd go hoop and there's always that connection there. But [this basketball pathway] definitely hurts relationships...

Here, the participant outlined that her friend group would consist of other athletes who had the same pathways. Other participants shared that these bonds were important not only for support, but also to compare notes and get advice as they navigated their new collegiate environments in a different country. In addition, while many shared losing touch with non-athlete friends, many maintained their relationships with close family, and those relationships frequently

bounced back upon their return. Many of the athletes continued to voice that they felt that collegiate basketball was like having two full-time jobs:

It wasn't easy, but it wasn't like the worst thing ever, if you're focused. A lot of sacrifices have to be made in order to succeed and maintain your GPA. In the beginning, I was all over the place and then I had to crack down and focus. It's cool, but it's like two full-time jobs, but you can do it if you make it work. You just have to make a lot of sacrifices, like the party life. If a party starts at eight and we have practice at 5 a.m., you probably can't go. Or I have to leave early, you know? I just found ways to make it work for me.

Two other athletes mentioned that they did not have much of a social life:

Yeah, definitely didn't have much of a social life. I always tell people I'm behind socially. I didn't experience the same thing you guys experienced in high school and I dang sure didn't experience a lot of things in college. It wasn't until my senior year when I finally started to loosen up a bit. I finally found my mojo and found a balance that allowed me to do the social things and everything else.

Obligations! You have to find time—it's an underlying recommendation, but it's more of a demand that you practice your skill on your own time on top of classes, weights, conditioning, and then finding time to be social, go out with friends, if you're not tired or have an abundance of things to do.

Therefore, both in high school and at university, many athletes found it a challenge to find time to do all that they had to do to get a scholarship, succeed, and thrive once they got one, *and* have an eventful social life. For some, their intense sport participation put a “damper” on their social lives. However, as many had friends who were also athletes on and off campus, their social experiences were often shared with other athletes. That is not to say the athletes did not enjoy their college experience—rather, they just had to be more disciplined and mindful about how they spent their evenings and weekends. Some athletes diversified their social time by having parties in their dorms or residences or going to social events on campus like fashion shows, although these experiences were often shared with teammates or athletes from other teams.

This intense sport participation also affected the participants' dating lives. Some were simply too busy for dating:

I didn't date in high school. I was just always so busy, and I was okay with that. Looking back on it, going to university and being so inexperienced in relationships, I would have done it differently, but I don't regret it. I made many relationships through basketball, and they're my longest lasting friendships.

As will be discussed in Chapter 7, many of the participants were seen as more attractive to their Black male counterparts because of their athletic participation; therefore, when they did date, they often dated other Black male athletes. As one athlete put it:

They loved it! It gave me something else to identify with. Most girls my age in high school, we're trying to find ourselves, who we are. [Playing basketball] gave me an identity and something to feel proud of. You get a lot of attention from guys because you play basketball and you're a girl.

However, not everyone had this experience, as for some, being "one of the guys," or the "homey", did not work to her advantage:

For the most part, not a lot of the guys hit on me. I was one of the guys, which kind of sucked at that time. Then again, I was also very scared about dating, too, so it wasn't a big deal. But then, a little bit of that attention would have been nice, you know? There was one or two that looked past everything else, but, for the most part, it was always like the homey-type situation. I was always around them, always with them because of all the training stuff.

While some of the relationships were started and able to last through basketball, others did not. Some of the participants had to contend with jealousy from their partners, particularly if they were not as athletically successful as they were. This jealousy could be demonstrated in the form of passive aggression, lack of overall support, excessive criticism, or outright avoidance of being put in athletic situations with the participants. Sometimes, this jealousy also came from other men in their lives and caused tension in their relationships. In response, the participants often ended the relationships. One participant shared that:

It can be very challenging being with someone, especially if they're not an athlete and don't understand what it is to have the life of an athlete. So, it's definitely hard to relate to someone who doesn't understand the time, the commitment, and dedication that you need to put in, or support you, or understand.

Overall, many of the athletes expressed that it was more difficult to maintain social relationships due to demands of competitive sport, but still enjoyed fulfilling relationships that were

often within basketball circles. For some it was seen as a sacrifice, while for others, something that required more intentional effort.

Discussion

The findings in this chapter reveal several important aspects concerning the various ways that the athletes thought about making it as Black female athletic scholarship hopefuls from Canada. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 4, there was a lack of awareness of Canadian opportunities that would support the athletic and academic careers of the athletes and contributed to a belief in the superiority of the American athletic, and to some extent, academic landscape. These findings begin to respond to Kidd's (1982) questions about the prevalence of Canadian athletes leaving Canada:

Why do some athletes head south unquestioningly while others pay their way to study in Canada? What backgrounds do they come from? What considerations are foremost in their minds? What is the result of this experience on their subsequent behaviour? If they return to Canada, do they lobby for similar opportunities, or do they become part of a conduit for Canadian athletes to U.S. colleges? (p. 299)

The participants who did receive Canadian offers left Canada because those offers were often far inferior to what was offered by American schools, making staying in Canada an unattractive option. As argued by Geiger (2013), the NCAA differs significantly from the CIS/USports because of ideological differences in mandate that affect funding, access, and quality. Given that the NCAA is more sport-focused and is a training ground for developing amateur athletes for the professional stage, they receive more funding, which serves to attract the world's best athletes, shape institutional reputations, and attract media attention (Geiger, 2013). Conversely, the CIS/USports is more academic and student development-focused, with a murkier pathway to professional opportunities, which means less funding, less of an ability to attract top talent, less media coverage, and, therefore, an overall less competitive athletic atmosphere (Ibid.). These differences in national and institutional ideological approaches may account for why the participants learned and expressed that American

schools had better athletic environments and offered them significantly more resources than Canadian schools, which made immigration to the United States be perceived as an essential step.

These findings also suggest that like their male and African-American counterparts, these Black female athletes did not feel that their existing social and educational contexts provided them with sufficient infrastructure, support, and opportunities to thrive using traditional pathways such as formal schooling or sport participation in Canada. Their experiences suggest a difficulty to thrive in their context academically and athletically and the development of the feeling like they have to leave Canada. The participants relied on U.S. athletic scholarships, which were effective and beneficial for all the participants, but also rife with heavy risk, time commitment, and sacrifice. As discussed in Chapter 5, the counternarratives outlining the athletes' journeys give even more credence to an adage prevalent in Black communities—namely, that they have to work much harder than the dominant group in order to have a chance at social and economic success. This harder work included the creation and maintenance of these divergent pathways and required extra emotional, physical, psychological, and navigational labour. This extra labour was particularly challenging for the women athletes, as they faced additional barriers with less rewards due to the interlocking nature of their status as racialized and gendered Black youth (see Chapters 7 and 8 for further discussion) (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado, 2001), including the labour required to have strong academic performance and potential during their high school years, which was ignored.

Therefore, in order to make it—that is, to give themselves a better chance at recognition for their talents and abilities, an affordable and fulfilling university experience, and to compete athletically—these athletes took on what amounted to multiple full-time high-risk jobs both in high school and university. Simply put, inequitable institutional structures that perpetuate systems of exclusion based on race, gender, and class, made simple things like getting a post-secondary

education in affordable ways or reaching one's full potential infinitely harder. As revealed by the findings in this study, this extra work is often necessary and arduous, even when the youth in question possess the motivation and the personal and intellectual capacity and skills to excel. As I have argued in previous chapters, it is through a reproduction of the ways in which the athletes' embodied skills, capital, and aspirations (given their positionality within the Canadian context) are made non-transferrable and unintelligible that this need to work harder to find other ways to make it, is incited.

These findings also further demonstrate the depths of the athletes' aspirational capital, given their strong commitment to finding ways to access to what they perceived as out of reach—namely, athletic careers and/or an affordable post-secondary education. The athletes also demonstrated agency, as they did not simply want to go to just any university but expressed a desire to access to the “college experience,” which included access to social and professional communities and experiences such as fraternities, sororities, and HBCUs, in particular. The participants continually identified these institutions as a unique and highly beneficial option that was distinct to the American collegiate landscape and inaccessible to them in Canada. Therefore, these athletes were very thoughtful about their goals, but confronted significant risks to gain access. As discussed in Chapter 5, underlying their descriptions of their motivations, experiences, and challenges was the desire for a rich and well-rounded educational experience that could provide professional and academic opportunities and position them well by being in spaces that challenged them academically and athletically. These desires were also shaped by a need to have their athletic and academic efforts valued, recognized, and rewarded. This, from the study participants' experience, often required their going to the United States.

Secondly, the findings reported in this chapter also suggest that American schools were able to offer the participants significantly better scholarship offers as compared to those afforded by

Canadian schools. The findings in this chapter also further unpack the precariousness of this pathway once the athletes accepted their scholarship offers. These additional forms of precarity included team mismatches and ill-treatment, which affected the players' emotional well-being. These experiences also affected the retention of the athletes, as these negative experiences and team mismatches often resulted in transfers to other teams within the United States and Canada, which, for some athletes, created barriers and delays to completing their undergraduate degrees.

For the interviewed athletes, transferring schools meant negotiating both the athletic and academic sides of the transfer. On the athletic side, this could mean restarting the recruitment process and finding and vetting teams while playing for another one, or in the short period between the end of the academic year and the next one, making sure that their expenses were going to be fully covered by the new institution. On the academic side, the participants also would have to negotiate the streamlining or entry and continuation of their degree programs at various institutions with different rules and standards, as well as ensure that their existing credits would be transferred to avoid additional time being added to their degrees. Previous research shows that institutional transfers at the post-secondary level can present challenges that affect student success (see Berger & Malaney, 2003; Flaga, 2006; Reyes, 2011; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). Transfer shock, which refers to a temporary decline in grades in the first two semesters after a transfer, also can occur, particularly for students transferring from junior colleges to four-year institutions (Hills, 1965; Ishitani, 2008; Laanan, 2001). These effects can also vary by discipline, with students in the social sciences, humanities, and fine arts experiencing a grades boost, while those in STEM and business experiencing declines in their grade point average (Cejda, 1997). In sum, the navigating of the transfer process alone amounted to additional emotional and psychological labour and can serve as an example of how these divergent pathways taken by marginalized Black youth contribute to their proverbial working harder.

In addition to the emotional and academic risks experienced by the participants due to team mismatches and transfers, other concerns were physical risks (injury) and the risk for exploitation or misguidance (see also Chapter 5). Approximately 70% of the participants reported experiencing an athletic injury, with some being career-stalling or ending. Collegiate athletes take on a lot of physical risk and sacrificing of their bodies given their grueling athletic schedules and as reported at the time of writing, the outcomes can be devastating. For example, in February 2018, Zion Williamson, freshman Duke University star athlete, sustained a knee sprain causing him to miss six games and almost a month of play (Lawrence, 2019; Tracy & Draper, 2019). This incident ignited debates about the future of his athletic career, while also reigniting debates about the nature of the amateur status of collegiate athletes in high revenue-generating sports like basketball, in which Black students are overrepresented, and whether they should be financially eligible for compensation (beyond their scholarships) for their athletic labour (see Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013; Davis, 1995; McDavis, 2019; A. W. Miller, 2011; M. G. Miller, 2011; Sanderson & Siegfried, 2015; Schneider, 2001; Schott, 1996; Sheetz, 2015). This example demonstrates the numerous risks taken on by many Black collegiate athletes that add to the precarity of this pathway, as their status as amateur athletes does not protect them from the setbacks and long-term implications of injuries, which can cause athletes, if they are unable to recover, their long-term health, scholarships, and future athletic opportunities, as well as derail their academic plans.

Furthermore, many of the athletes reported making significant social sacrifices to be successful in their athletic and academic endeavours. However, as discussed in previous chapters, these social sacrifices need to be balanced against the social benefits of engaging with high-level competitive basketball. As expressed by the participants in previous chapters, while non-athletic relationships were harder to sustain, they often experienced deep, fulfilling, and long-lasting relationships with many of their athletic peers. In addition, many of these relationships were rooted

in shared athletic experiences, which offered the athletes the benefit of a strong sense of community and belonging.

Finally, these findings also illustrate how both race and gender interact to create specific barriers for Black female athletes (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Much of the scholarly research on retention in collegiate sport, in general, and Black athletes, in particular, focuses on the experiences of Black males and relations to their academic challenges (see Baker & Hawkins, 2016; Benson, 2016; Brooks et al., 2013; Robst & Keil, 2000; Ting, 2009). However, these findings differ, because many of the female athletes in this study were high-achieving and athletically talented and still faced many systemic barriers within Canada to nurture their abilities and reach their full potential athletically and academically. This lack resulted in a perceived need to immigrate to the United States.

Their experiences demonstrate how, due to race, gender, and class, marginalized groups frequently have to seek and create alternative pathways to achieve success in order to make it, thus uncovering the effects and risks of taking on those pathways, and just how far and deep their aspirational capital can go. These findings also reveal the more psycho-social aspects of collegiate athletic experiences and retention, as well as how Black female Canadian athlete experiences are distinct from other groups. Therefore, while making it can be subjective, it was broadly defined by the participants as reaching their full potential athletically and/or academically and, at the very least, securing an undergraduate degree in fulfilling and affordable ways.

Chapter 7: Contested Identities: Navigating Gender, Sexuality, and Race

Throughout their journeys of navigating various social structures to get looks from U.S. schools and eventually attend and play for them, the participants revealed particular gendered experiences and ideas about their identities as high-level competitive female athletes in Black bodies. Broadly speaking, this chapter explores how the participants grappled with societal ideas about the intersection of their gender, sexuality, and race, within competitive athletics. Accordingly, in this chapter, I explore: 1) what it meant to be a Black female competitive basketball player at that time through a discussion of how the participants constructed their identities; 2) how the participants grappled with sexism, gender stereotypes, and barriers; and 3) how these gendered experiences intersected with race to complicate their athletic scholarship pursuits.

I'm a Tomboy! Learning Athletic Gender Roles Through Performing Masculinity

As discussed in Chapter 4, for many of the athletes interviewed in this study, Monica Wright, the protagonist from the film *Love and Basketball*, exposed the participants to the possibilities of U.S. athletic scholarships and professional play for Black female basketball athletes. Monica also served as an archetype for the persona or identity of a Black female basketball player. The vast majority of the participants constructed themselves like Monica's character—tomboys that were competitive from a young age and were different from their non-athletic Black female peers due to their “tomboy” identities. One participant shared how she perceived herself as a tomboy:

When I was a kid, I was a tomboy and, when I say tomboy, I mean that I used to do karate, [in patois] jump up, jumpy jumpy, hop over fence, ride bike over mountain [laughs]. It really started from playing any type of sport in gym [class] from hockey to whatever it was, and I was just really, really good at all of them.

Another participant shared how she perceived herself as a tomboy because of her sport participation with other boys:

Well, I've always been the tomboy. I remember in second grade, I used to play tackle football with the boys. It started with a family friend that I went to school with, and I would just hang around him all the time. I had no formal training or anything like that at that age. It was just me kind of running around at recess playing football, and then it changed to basketball.

For many participants, being a tomboy was not just about playing sports, being athletic, or playing with boys—rather, it was also about fashion and lifestyle. One participant shared how her physical appearance and fashion choices marked her as tomboy:

Participant: Just in the physical appearance, being a tomboy, I was called a boy because of how I dressed. And yeah, I adapted to the baller lifestyle, I'm okay with not combing my hair for a few days. My mom didn't like it. Nobody did.

Interviewer: So, that's where it [the baller lifestyle] comes from?! I stopped playing at 25. I played in college here, and I just got so used to the flipflops and socks!

P: I still do [wear the flip flops and socks] [laughs].

I: The basketball shorts and like a marina, not combing your hair so everyone is like: "What's wrong with you, can you fix?" And I'm like [shrugs]: "I don't care."

P: My cousin threw a lot of my stuff away because they were like: "You need to stop!" I was like: "Whatever!"

In this exchange, the participant and I alluded to a basketball lifestyle that influenced fashion and grooming choices. As female ballers playing on multiple teams, with lots of athletic training, running, and basketball development in between, many players in that era would wear in baggy clothes or basketball gear, including basketball shorts, tracksuits, athletic t-shirts, hoodies, and so on, which kept them always in a position to be ready to play or train. One participant described herself as "always carrying around my basketball, basketball shirt, and shoes." In-between workouts and practices, players would also lounge around in athletic flip flops and socks for comfort after hours of running around in basketball shoes, and also because the shoes they play in are never the same shoes that they wear casually. With regard to hair, players often kept their hair in simple styles like buns, ponytails, or braids in order to withstand the constant physical activity and sweating; thus,

“not combing your hair” actually just refers to not wearing high-maintenance, time-consuming, elaborate, or ornate hairstyles.

Part of being a tomboy was also about being taken seriously as a player. One participant shared how fashion choices contributed to her identification as a serious player: “It almost felt like it was the thing to dress like a boy. Like if I come to the gym in a spandex, they’re not going to think I’m a ball player. But if I come in with track pants, a hoodie, a Jansport bag, people automatically assume that’s a baller.” Here, the participant identified how being taken seriously as a baller was shaped by mimicking popular male athletic styles of dress. This identification with male players persisted, as many participants shared how being constructed as a good player was frequently shaped by playing like or with male players. In these ways, the participants learned their gender roles within basketball spaces through playing with boys, which came to define what made a good player. One athlete shared how being a good player was defined through her ability to play with boys:

Yeah, I think it was better that I was a girl and good, because a lot of people didn’t think that girls can shoot or play, and I could outplay most of the boys at my high school. I actually used to play on a guy’s team because my elementary school didn’t have a girls’ team.

This player in particular had to play on the boys’ team at her school because a girls’ team did not exist and through this experience; she learned not only that men’s sports were valued over women’s sports, but also that men were the standard to measure herself against. Through experiences in playing with male athletes, many participants came to learn how female players were perceived and actively worked to prove themselves. One participant provided the following account of how, when she went to gyms to train, the male players would play “soft” with her:

When you step in a gym, (unless they know who you are), guys are going to take it lightly on you, right? Some who know you will be like: “OK she’s a girl, but then she’s not a girl on the court because of the way she plays” or, “She’s a girl, but not like a typical college girl.” So yes, [gender] does have an effect big time, because we live in a society where we measure people based on these outside elements like gender, and people use it to judge you.

This experience demonstrates how female ballers are not taken seriously by their male counterparts and have to prove that they are good enough to be athletically engaged seriously. In describing the rationale behind her male athletic peers' assumptions, she demonstrated that the implication was that her skill level was inferior because she was a girl and therefore, the effort her male opponent exudes was minimal. She also demonstrated the distinctions made between different types of female players and, in response, male athletes decided to which extent they would engage with them athletically. It is only when she demonstrated that she could play "like a guy" that she was taken seriously by her male athletic peers. Other participants had similar experiences:

[They assume] you can't play. [So, either] you can't play, they won't 'd' you up [play defence] completely, they won't hit you as hard, or they baby you. It's because they think you can't take a lick [handle physicality], and I'm always telling them: "No! Play, because you're giving me an opportunity to get better. They need to just see that I want the ball, and I don't care how I'm going to get it.

Many of the participants just wanted to be taken seriously as players and resented when male opponents played them "soft":

It has taken me a long time to gain respect from the guys. No matter which gym I go to, they all respect me, but when I go to gyms, it's to play basketball. Don't play with me nicely because I compete. Don't play any less of what you're worth because there's a female on the court now. If anything, play harder, you know? The initial reaction from men is: "I don't want to cross her," but then when I play, they realize that [I'm good] and get mad that I don't play like a female.

Another participant provided further insight:

Now that I'm older, I'll say yes, [gender matters] because I grew up around a lot of guys, playing street basketball, learning how to be competitive. When you're on the court with females, it's like: "Oh my god, it's a tomboy!" and I'm just like: "Stop, it's basketball, you know?" We are athletes first. Not a female athlete. Don't let my gender define how good I can be or how much I can trash talk. I don't like to be categorized. Like no, I'm an athlete and the older I get, the more I see it. I can play with guys at LA fitness and compete and get hit. They're like: "Ma'am I'm sorry" and I'm like: "Don't hold up the floor." Play the game because I'm not going to play soft with you, either. I [command] respect, so when new people come, they're like: "Yo, this girl is a girl, but doesn't play like a girl, play her close." I also see myself getting softer around females or I might get bodied and hit a female and I'm like: "Sorry, sorry, I feel bad," when I shouldn't feel bad because I'm competing. [Gender] changes things.

These experiences almost always resulted in participants' measuring their athletic ability through the lens of male players. When asked if her gender shaped her playing experience, one participant replied no, but still measured her ability against how male players engaged with her:

I would say no, and I think it's because of my physical ability and my talent, and a lot of the guys respected me a lot because I was a good player. So, when the guys would play, they always [asked me to join their team]. I never had a problem with being picked last because I was a girl, I was just that good of an athlete.

Another player, while describing that she was never perceived as masculine as a player, described how ability can be measured by the capacity to play like male athletes:

Never, never, never, never, never [seen as masculine]. They never put me in that category, like they always wanted me to play harder, stronger, and more like a man. And when they'd say to play more like a man or play more masculine, I never took offense because I knew that meant just go harder.

In both of the instances quoted above, the players measured their athletic ability by the ways in which their male peers judged their ability. However, one participant refuted the tomboy label altogether:

When people called me that [a tomboy], they told me that I was less of a female. So, if you're a little girl try to find yourself, society tells you that you're a girl and you have to act, dress, and look a certain way. If you haven't balanced that, you will have an internal battle. I had that internal battle from internalizing things when I didn't have to. I was just unable to receive that [that being a girl meant possessing an innately lower skill level] or see that picture.

Through largely constructing themselves as tomboys, the women in this study revealed that, in multiple ways and through their experiences with male acceptance and inclusion, they came to understand that being a good player was defined by what their Black male counterparts did in terms of aesthetic and style of play. In addition, the notions of "playing harder" or "better" also appeared to be unconsciously associated with playing like their male counterparts.

Soft, Pretty, and Unskilled or Hard, Average, and Skilled?

Many of the athletes in the study grappled with the dichotomous idea of defining a good player as masculine-presenting in style of play and through acceptance and inclusion by male

athletic peers, with the equivocation of feminine presentation in style of play as being “soft.” This grappling surfaced in the discussions about the role of perceived attractiveness in their athletic experiences. One participant shared how she was admonished for playing too “feminine”:

I was [often] told to stop playing so pretty. I would go to the local gym to play pickup with my dad and his friends in the summer. Compared to the average guy who’d play after work, I was a bit better, so I would beat up on some of the guys, and I was told: “Stop playing so pretty” and I was like: “What does that even mean?” I don’t know. So, I would go play my dad because they would try to push me around and make certain calls [fouls] and then be like: “You can’t make that call, that’s not a right call” or: “Oh, don’t act like one of them [girls]”.

Here, the participant is describing how her style of play was critiqued as being too pretty and feminine, despite her being a stronger player than her male opponents, who were also adults at the time. In addition, if she tried to get “calls” for fouls, which would give her possession of the ball or put her at the foul line, the male players would then warn her not play like a “girl” by complaining when she was fouled. In this way, her advocacy for fairness in play was read and dismissed as feminine, soft, and, therefore, negative.

For some, playing or looking “pretty” through grooming in feminine ways in competitive spaces would often also serve as an indicator that a player was less skilled. One participant reflected on this observation:

People see you and think you’re not as good of a player [if you’re pretty]. A lot of people think that about pretty players, or some people go out there [on the court] with a ponytail [hair extensions], but when I was in high school, we didn’t do that, we just put our [own] hair up. Now people are putting on lipstick. I play girls overseas with makeup on, lipstick, mascara, everything!

Other players agreed that skill level was often judged by looks:

I do think if you see a really pretty girl playing, you’re like: “Oh, she probably ain’t got nothing,” then you go on the court, she crosses you up and you’re like: “Where did that come from?” If they look a certain way, you kind of think of them as softer. Or the female that looks really hard and aggressive? That has nothing to do with your game, but people make those assumptions based on how you look. [Attractiveness] does have an effect.

Another player offered her perspective on how looks shape the perception of skill level:

If a girl was more masculine, I would assume she could ball and then you realize she can't. I think on both sides, male and female, we have a construction of what good and bad looks like, and we judge by that. I definitely made judgements on how people played based on how masculine they looked, or how they dressed on the court. If she had a headband or wristband, she came to play.

Some players also shared how attractiveness not only shaped assumptions about an athlete's skill level, but also how much attention they would get from coaches, who were often male. That extra attention was indirect and subtle, but still resulted in some players' getting more attention and opportunities than others who were just as, if not more, skilled. This preferential treatment was described as a type of favoritism. One player shared how she noticed that trend:

Oh definitely! Even if we don't know it or admit it out loud, it [attractiveness] does [matter], because once again we're caught up [in that thinking], we're taught to measure somebody based on physical appearance or what society says is beautiful, and when somebody looks the part, they *do* get more attention, a certain like approval, not always, but it does play a part.

One participant described it as "getting away with more":

I would definitely say that women who look better can get away with a lot more basketball-wise. They [the coaches] just won't say anything because she looks good, but again, that wasn't something I ever experienced, personally. I totally get it. There are guys I know who are in love with Skylar Diggins, who couldn't tell you which university she went to or how many championships she won.

Another participant echoed these sentiments, linking the experience to tennis star Serena Williams and raising the issue of colorism:

Participant: I think Serena Williams is a great example. She gets cut up daily for being more muscular than the average person. Considering that Black women are the least desirable in that study that came out not too long ago, it's not surprising that we're seen as masculine because we are not seen as the most desirable to begin with. And then as soon as you get the muscles? Everything's going to work against us.

Interviewer: So, with the Serena example, do you feel that attractiveness affects how a player is perceived?

P: Yes definitely. Just looking at tennis—Anna Kournikova—not a good tennis player, did nothing, never won a major, but she's famous because she's skinny and pretty.

I: I noticed that, too because I didn't even know if she's ever won a major. I watch tennis, too, and I would always see her and hear her name.

P: That girl did nothing but look cute in a skirt. I think what's also a pain in the butt is that these women that are seen as beautiful are never dark.

In these passages, the athletes reference Skylar Diggins, a professional basketball player discussed in Chapter 2, who fits Black beauty ideals and Serena Williams, who is of a darker complexion and does not. In these broader discussions of attractiveness, some of the participants alluded to an assumed understanding of what Black beauty ideals are for women (light skin and eyes, long hair, more aquiline features), and why Diggins is a representative example of how and why attractiveness can matter for Black female athletes. The athletes referred to how preferential treatment occurs within athletic spaces, suggesting that the masculinization of Black female athletes also occurs on a spectrum, and that Black women who are of a darker complexion, like Serena Williams, with less aquiline features are more likely to be masculinized than their lighter skinned counterparts due to colorism.²² For one athlete, her father pushed her to resist linking her ability to masculinity:

[My dad] was like: "Don't ever let anyone tell you that you play like a guy. You don't play like a guy; you play like a good female. You're good, but you're a woman." I just think the gender biases and stereotypes that we have like: "Oh, she's athletic, she's masculine," I guess that accompanies most female athletes, but I got the other side of that, which was annoying. I got the: "You're too pretty to hoop." I don't want to say prissy, but they'd be like: "You're not a hooper" because I was too pretty, and I'd wear mascara or whatever.

There is an additional complexity to the tomboy persona: as the participants revealed, in their basketball world, anything perceived as feminine or physically attractive was constructed as an identifier for a weak player. The more masculine a player was perceived, the more skilled they were thought to be. However, for Black female athletes in particular, these views were modulated

²² Colorism refers to a type of race-based discrimination based on the level of darkness of one's skin tone within a racialized group. This practice has historical roots in slavery and results in lighter-skinned people within a racialized group having more social value in society being perceived as less threatening, more intelligent, and more attractive than their darker-skinned counterparts (Banks, 1999; Bodenhorn, 2006; Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Hordge Freeman, 2010; A. P. Harris, 2008; Hunter, 2002, 2007; Wilder & Cain, 2011). For example, studies also show that in Black communities, these categorizations affect personal and socioeconomic markers of success and well-being (M. S. Harrison et al., 2008; Hunter, 2002; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey et al., 1987; Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Udry et al., 1971).

by racial beauty standards and colorism, which mark darker-skinned Black women as inherently more masculine and less attractive, all of which further complicates how masculinity is attached to Black female athletes.

“Too Muscular”

Being a real “baller” and being taken seriously as a competitive athlete were not only shaped by how male athletes interpreted female athletes’ skills, their performance of Black masculine styles of play, and level of attractiveness, but also how their muscular physiques were read by others. While many of the participants were proud of their strong bodies, some of the participants grappled with the fact that their athletic bodies garnered not only negative attention, but also shaped how others perceived their ability and measured their femininity. One athlete shared how her muscular body evoked a lot of criticism, which incited insecurity during her high school years:

I definitely was criticized for my muscular body. Guys that I knew would say things in a joking way, but it was just annoying. I remember feeling a little bit insecure with my body when I was younger and kind of growing up because obviously you don’t look like everyone else. However, I think basketball gave me a platform to feel more comfortable in my skin.

Another athlete shared a similar account of how she reacted to criticisms of her muscularity:

I know I’d rather not have flat arms and it’s [my muscular arms] something I kind of noticed, you know? I’d try not to flex and not to have my hand up in pictures, sometimes. I’ve started to embrace it, but being told I’m too muscular has played into those insecurities [about my body].

While some participants had a heightened awareness of their physique because of comments from others, some were self-conscious on their own:

Awareness without anyone saying anything—I’d only notice when I was in more regular roles. When I was in high school, I didn’t really wear dresses or get dressed up too much, so my muscles would show. The way my body looked affected me, but when I was in college, I never got any comments from guys or other girls saying: “You look masculine,” but I was still very self-conscious about my body type because I put on muscle very easily. I have very muscular arms, not very, but they’re huge to regular people. I also have broad shoulders, which to me was a big issue, but I never had anyone directly say to me: “You look masculine.”

While, during the interviews, many study participants said they had experienced criticism of their muscular bodies, the following account shared by a participant was by far the most overt:

Participant: You know what, I would say yes [that masculinity was attached to me], just because in college, fans of opposing teams would yell stupid stuff and were like: “Oh my god, that’s Juwanna Mann!”

Interviewer: What?!!

P: Yeah.

I: Oh my god! Did you?! Yo, I would have snapped!

P: Nah, they were like: “Too cute to be a man, too manly to be a woman, so I’ll call you Juwanna Man,” or something like that they said, and I was like: “Ok, but here I am on a woman’s team, you know?” Whatever!

In this exchange, the athlete described how her criticisms came not from her male athletic peers, friends, or people she actually knew, but in the form of taunts from strangers in the crowd at her games while she was on a scholarship at a U.S. institution. *Juwanna Man* is a 2002 film where the protagonist, a Black male professional basketball player, loses his post in the league and then, to continue playing professional basketball, decides to dress in drag to become the star of a women’s professional team. In effect, given the muscularity and height of the player, the spectators in the crowd were accusing her of being a man in order to insult her. This experience explained by the participants demonstrates the fine line that Black female players must walk; they have to be strong, style themselves as Black male players, play like them, but not too much.

Some of the athletes discussed how this relationship between muscular female bodies and masculinity is common across the board for female athletes. Many also made reference to Serena Williams and the ways in which she is always constructed as masculine because of her body:

I think that’s the thing that accompanies most female athletes. Serena Williams, people didn’t see her as feminine until she came out with those pictures where she was doing splits on the poles or whatever. She’s always had a beautiful body, always as athletic as she is now, but it’s always like: “She’s too big or she’s not feminine”. It’s just a stereotype that accompanies female athletes in general.

One athlete in particular pointed out that it is not just female athletes in general, but *Black* female athletes in particular who have different physiques from their non-Black counterparts:

I think it depends on the sport, because your physique will adapt to whatever you're doing. So, I think women in general can be very masculine because of their muscular build, but I think with Black women in particular, because of the way our body is toned when working out? It's different. It's genetics, there are other races that are strong in builds too, but because we tend to be more cut, I think that it's our genes. The "big strong butt" thing, I think it has to do with genes as well, but I think Black women in general, that whole femininity thing [of not being considered feminine]? It's complex.

Many of the athletes eventually rejected these constructions of their bodies, becoming more comfortable after their university athletic careers:

Yeah, [I was perceived as muscular]. Probably because my muscles were really big. It was really big [laughs], and it was just very different compared to everybody else. At the time I was little self-conscious. I couldn't help it. I wasn't going to stop doing what I was doing, though, because I [was] trying to get this scholarship, you know? Now? I embrace it! So, if they don't like it, then oh well!

As Black female athletes, some of the participants were at times hyper-aware of how their strong muscular bodies were read as too masculine. The athletes were also aware of the fact that, in order to be seen as good players, they had to dress and play like their Black male counterparts, while also being sure not to mimic them too much for fear of veering into the lesbian territory. Their bodies were policed not only in their muscularity, but also in their athletic performance and their physical attractiveness in order to assess their basketball skill. The message presented was a contradictory one—namely, that male attributes are better for sports, but bad if they are too well-reproduced on a female body, while also constructing feminine forms of athletic expression as weak.

But I'm Not Gay, Though!

Another element that informed the tomboy identity was sexuality. In addition to dress, playing with male athletic peers and judging oneself against their standards, while also not being or playing too pretty, and experiencing criticism for having very muscular athletic bodies, the players were also expected to do all these things while also not being mistaken for a lesbian. This particular

expectation was shaped by race, as players identified the ways in which White competitive female ballers in their era had a different aesthetic that was read as more traditionally feminine.²³ As one participant put it, “[Black players will] bag [their] clothes and then the White athletes wouldn’t. Like where I played, they would roll their shorts by their waist.” The athletes often alluded to differences in the specificity of how Black players presented themselves physically and in style of dress. White players often presented in more traditionally feminine ways in athletic spaces, so they would roll their shorts at the waist to make them not be too baggy or long and would show more of their legs, whereas Black players would often wear the shorts as is, making them longer and baggier. Some players identified how Black players in their era would not only wear “masculine” baggy clothes but would also rarely wear makeup or elaborate hairstyles in comparison to their White counterparts and thus, presented in less traditionally feminine ways. Overall, many of the participants had some awareness of how their baller aesthetic could mark them as potential lesbians and resisted that label, with some arguing that the association between female ballers and lesbianism is more rigidly applied now than it was then: “Uhhhh, nowadays [if you dress the way we did, everyone will assume you are a lesbian], but before? No, because everything [then] was baggy”, and [now] if you play basketball, you’re not feminine pretty much.”

Other participants described how, during their high school years, within Black popular culture and spaces, wearing baggy clothes, or even men’s clothes, was more of a cultural fashion trend and the cool thing to do—and not necessarily an indication or marker of sexuality. In fact, many of the participants described how many of their athletic and non-athletic Black male peers found them more attractive and/or pursued romantic relationships with them *because* they were tomboys who played basketball at a high level, making their aesthetic a form of currency within

²³ In this research, traditional femininity refers to gender expectations rooted in Victorian ideals, which mark peak femininity such as women that are gentle, submissive, passive, and modest, presenting themselves in ways that are shaped by patriarchal gender norms (Gorham, 2012; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003)

Black spaces, which demonstrates the distinct way that the participants were thinking about their femininity, attractiveness, and sexuality. One participant shared her experience, noting that, in the current context, that type of fluidity would be interpreted differently:

I was definitely perceived as a tomboy, but at that time, it went with the basketball flow. Guys would [love it]. You can't do that now because the girl may be gay or deciding if she is. Back then, you could be the prettiest girl and wear baggy clothes with guys running you down—and you play ball?! It's bonus for them, so really, I was perceived as a tomboy, but you know, still talking to guys. I wasn't a butch; it wasn't like that. I wore my Jordans and baggy jeans. It was a thing!

One participant shared how, when men showed interest, her baller persona was seen as a good thing, but also because she didn't veer too far into "lesbian territory":

Participant: say if I get a DM or something, it's like: "Oh, you're beautiful and you ball." It was a compliment to be an athlete and not looking like a dyke.

Interviewer: That's what guys would say?

P: They would say: "All female basketball players are dykish." I don't want to offend anybody, but that's kind of a term I would hear a lot. So, when I say I play basketball, people would be surprised that I don't look masculine. I wouldn't say [it's] in sports with my coaches, but from interested people.

Another participant noted the difference between how players with a tomboy aesthetic are read now in comparison to when she was seeking a U.S. scholarship:

Now? No, because everyone's going around with this pride stuff now, so I don't think [that I could carry myself the way I did back then now, and not be assumed to be a lesbian]. They perceive women basketball players as all lesbians [now]. I think my family had thought I was lesbian or something like that because every time I brought a guy home, they were just like: "Thank God!"

Other participants shared that their sexuality was also indirectly questioned by their families because of their aesthetic and deep athletic participation. One participant shared how her family indirectly questioned her sexuality by expressing excitement when she brought her now-husband home to meet them:

They welcomed him in, and someone was like: "It's about time" or, "We were worried there for a second." So, maybe back in the day, it didn't feel like [they thought I was a lesbian], but I feel it way more now in the basketball culture than I did back then.

Others experienced more direct questioning about their sexuality, but only once they got to university: "They question your sexuality! I got that a lot of that in university [from peers], not in high school, but once I got to university it was like, 'Are you gay?' And I was like, 'Nope!'" Some participants also attributed the linkages to sexuality to basketball itself:

Well, I think it depends on what kind of sport you play [whether people make assumptions about your sexuality]. Like, if you're playing tennis or something like that, people see you as feminine, but I think there's specific sports that people don't see as a feminine sport and basketball is one of them. I've been on plenty of teams, and I've had a lot of teammates that were lesbian and carried themselves like they were guys, and you see a lot of that if you watch WNBA, but I think there's this stereotype that's just placed on a woman who plays basketball.

Conclusion

Thus far, the athletes shared how they made sense of the complexities of their tomboy identities. They learned how to define being a good basketball player through playing with men and grappling with comparisons between themselves and their male peers. They also learned that physical expression through dress, appearance, and style of play shaped perceptions of their athletic skill and through how feminine presentations were frequently constructed as weaker or less skilled. In addition, the athletes learned that, while it was important to present themselves as athletes in more masculine ways, they still had to contend with criticism of their bodies if they looked too strong or too close to men's muscular bodies and, therefore, had to walk a fine line between being perceived as too feminine and too masculine, or experience a questioning of their sexual identity. Therefore, in many ways, men tended to occupy a lot of ideological space in the athletic sphere, through their influence and power to shape the standards and boundaries of beauty, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and athletic skill.

Learning Male Athletic Supremacy

Gymnasiums as a Contested Space

Not only did the male athletic peers of the participants occupy tremendous ideological space, but they also dominated physical space through how they dominated gymnasiums. As basketball athletes playing on multiple teams, attending multiple practices, training, and playing in games, the study participants spent a considerable amount of time in gyms. Outside of formal athletic development spaces like teams or if they had a fitness club membership, the athletes also needed informal gym time to work on their game to work on their shooting, footwork, post-moves, layups, and so on. This informal gym time was essential to their development as players and scholarship seekers because through this personalized and individualized time, they could refine their game and work to improve the individual skills that needed attention. However, access to gyms within the GTA proved to be a challenge for many of the participants. One of the key barriers to accessing gyms was a lack of open and informal access. Few recreation centres and public spaces allowed open access to their gyms to play basketball in unstructured and unsupervised ways and, if they did, such access was typically heavily regulated with limited time frames, requiring ongoing memberships and sometimes, high user fees. These restrictions served as barriers for the participants who needed opportunities to play informally after school or on the weekend, outside of their team affiliations.²⁴

The few gyms that did have open, informal, and unstructured access had additional barriers to access. Firstly, they were very rare or, at the very least, far from the communities the players lived

²⁴ While under-researched within this context, one news report indicates that access to basketball courts, particularly within the GTA, is limited due to racial bias, as many municipalities are reluctant to provide open access to gyms, despite basketball's popularity, for fear that it will attract an abundance of Black youth, which may result in violence, drug dealing, and disruptive behaviours (Bascaramurty, 2017; CityNews, 2007, 2008; Etobicoke Guardian, 2008; F.A.C.E.S. of Peel Collaborative, 2015; Lakey, 2010). Black youth often struggle to find space to play informally within their communities and, in response, must travel to other communities or pay high fees for private or more unstructured access to basketball facilities (Bascaramurty, 2017). Aladejebi and colleagues (2022) also more deeply examine this issue.

in, causing them to have to travel far distances just for a few unstructured hours of playing. One participant recalled such an experience:

Most of the gyms that were open and available were always on the west, so, it wasn't easily accessible. I remember some schools [in Central Toronto], but they are not easily accessible. I don't have a car and I'm not driving, so, I'm playing at Falstaff (community centre in Western Toronto). These places are far from where I live [far east Toronto]. So, if my gym wasn't open at the school, or if I couldn't get to the rec center after school, those [Central and West gyms] were my options.

Another player shared how she would also travel across town to find a gym:

Growing up in Scarborough, there were open gyms, but you didn't want to train with the man dem [male players] [laughs]! So, I would have to travel across the city twice a week, from Scarborough to the West end and study on the TTC [public transit]. I made that sacrifice to travel across the city to train with the best coaches. I wanted to train with the best, work with the best; the people who would elevate me to that next level. I wasn't just training with those guys at the rec centre.

In this passage, the participant demonstrates the length that she had to go to, in order to access gyms. She noted that she did not want to train with the "man dem" [local Black male youth], who dominated the gym in her local community, so she opted to travel across town for other options. Another participant suggested that gym access is part of a larger Canadian problem. When asked to identify a barrier to obtaining U.S. athletic scholarships, this participant identified gym access as one:

Resources! Compared to the States, in Canada, we didn't have the best resources to become a better player. You look at the States and they have 24-hour basketball gyms. 24 hours! We didn't have that when we were young. It was the resources. That was a barrier, not being able to keep up athletically.

Another player echoed this as she explained how difficult it was to find a gym to practice in:

Yeah, I would say it was maybe just the inconvenience [of the long travel to accessible gyms] and then, there's the added expense. You have to get a membership for a gym. I mean, if you want to go to a community center, there's a bunch of other people in there, so you have to try and find a rim. It was just inconvenient.

Many of the participants alluded to how, even when they found available gyms, male players dominated the space. The few gyms that did have unstructured and unsupervised basketball gym

time²⁵ were often flooded by male players who would occupy many of the rims or play full-court games that would take up all the space. Some noted that they were respected as players by these male athletes and would play with them; however, as noted earlier, these opportunities to play with male players were earned, as some male players would play them “soft” or as one participant mentioned, “Not to be vain, but I think the biggest thing was guys hitting on me.” While playing with the male players was an option, for the players who wanted to simply work on their game, there was simply not much space to:

That was an issue: getting in the gym and not actually seeing the floor [if men were playing]. I only went to the gym on the girl’s night or the times when it was allocated for the girls to play. But there were several times when a bunch of us would go and do an open run [unstructured play] and the guys would just dash us to the side and not even let us get on the court. I guess if it wasn’t a competitive run, they would run us off the court, but like listen, all of us are trying to get better, you know? But those guys? I’m not trying to mess with them.

Here, the participant describes how when she would try to create unstructured basketball playing time, the male players would simply begin playing a game and rather than share the space, would take over the entire court, literally running her and her peers off.

Consequently, many athletes in the study had to heavily rely on gym access through more formal means, such as their participation on the many teams they played for through their predominantly male coaches, or through their high schools, or even part-time jobs in various municipalities. One participant reflected on her experience saying that, even as a professional player, she had a hard time finding practice space:

Once we left high school and when I came back from university in the summers? [Outside of my team affiliated space] it was hard to find gym space. And then, when I was pro and when I was home [in Canada] in the summers, it was also hard to find gym space.

Another player shared her difficulties finding gyms outside of her team-affiliated space:

²⁵ Informal and unstructured basketball play in community gyms is often colloquially referred to as a “run” or pick-up basketball.

Yeah, it was [hard to find gyms], but luckily, I had really good coaches who were always able to secure space and I was always in the gym with them, but it was nearly impossible for me to find gym space on my own. It's about the fact that without having them help, it would have been pretty difficult.

Like the other two participants, some athletes relied on custodians to allow them to practice their skills before school:

The caretakers would be there early, and my coach used to wake me up at 5:30 in the morning and he'd come and pick me up. So, I would put in work there and I still played rep ball outside of school, so I was still practicing after school. On the weekend, it was a lot of basketball, a lot of the time for training.

Another participant shared how she found space to practice through school support:

At my school, they were all on board [with my athletic aspirations] and so supportive, so if I wanted to practice on a Friday after classes, they'd be like: "Yeah, you have a far net, just don't disturb anybody" kind of thing. And then my actual coaches would take me to the side or something and help me out after practice. It was very easy to get [a gym] athletic support.

One athlete transferred to a sports-focused high school, which allowed her to get lots of gym access, but outside of that she also struggled for space:

I was fortunate enough to transfer to a sports school and they had a really good facility. Finding a facility is kind of tough these days, though. Even now, I train in Pickering [far east GTA]. If I didn't have [that facility], I would struggle because I wouldn't know where to go to work out, and you have to buy a membership just to use the court! It's not accessible to the average basketball player. You kind of have to do it with someone willing to be on the court or provide a space to utilize.

Overall, for many of the athletes in this study, informal practice space was scarce in the GTA due to geography, policy, and affordance. As a result, players had to rely on their coaches, formal team affiliations, schools, and even jobs to find open access to gyms. However, whenever players did find these rarely open gyms, if they could not or did not want to or play with their male counterparts, it was difficult to secure practice space for themselves. Through these experiences and their navigation of them, the participants learned that, as women, their athletic participation was undervalued and that men often dominated athletic spaces.

Unequal Support

These barriers persisted beyond the participants' high school playing years into their collegiate and professional playing careers, as many of the participants noted their male counterparts garnered much more attention and financial and institutional support. For example, in many collegiate programs, participants insisted that funding for sports programs was unequally distributed between men's and women's teams. Many of the athletes explained that the differences were not always measured by how well the teams performed and resulted in not just more money, but free meals and more sponsorships opportunities. One player shared her playing experience:

It definitely wasn't equal! Our school's funding, all the money, between the men's and women's basketball teams? We were funding and bringing in 750k/year. Almost all that money was for football, for them to get new outfits, uniforms, and we saw none of it. Our coach would fight for us to get stuff like a new court in the facility, a new change and locker room, and we got new jerseys and uniforms. She also fought for us to get new travel gear and equipment, new shoes. But if it wasn't for all that fighting? It's not the same. I didn't like it. The men will always have the upper hand in regard to funding and salaries and all that.

Another athlete shared a similar experience:

Yes, big time! Those boys got everything. They didn't get in trouble for anything and if they needed any gear, or needed anything, they'd have it, no question. They got better treatment, they got whatever they wanted: the most gym time, the most gear, the best trips, treatment, everything. [Sigh] They were higher than us in everything, including how they were treated. For sure, there was no comparison.

The differences between men's and women's teams could not be explained away by the differences in athletic performance, either. One athlete shared how she experienced this gendered differential treatment even when her team was higher performing:

There were definitely huge gender differences, especially at the first DI school. Our team generated a lot more revenue, but they'd [the men's team] get paid thousands and thousands to go play big schools and better track suits and nicer shoes. If it came to using the good gym, we'd get stuck with the shitty gym. It was little things like that. At both schools, the men's teams sucked, and we were better than them, so it was very frustrating. We actually win games, but they still get a bunch of stuff.

For one player, the gap closed a little once her team performed better:

The men's team used to be able to get priority practice time and we had to find a secondary time, right? When it came to travel, the men's team gets the big bus and we're sitting on the short bus. And we have a bigger team than them! They're longer than us, but we have more players, you know? There were big differences the first year. The second year was a little more even because we did well.

For another player, however, in rare form, her collegiate teams actually experienced equal treatment with the men's team due to similar performance:

On both of the teams that I played for, women's basketball actually brought in more money than the men's basketball program, in terms of how good we were. So, there was never a shortage of how much money we got, or the nice hotels we stayed at, we always got the best of the best.

This differential treatment persisted during other phases in their careers and through less fan support. The athletes shared that they noticed differences at almost every level of play, including high school, club, provincial and national teams, and even at the professional levels. Some of the participants made sense of these differences by rationalizing that it was simply the nature of women's sport:

Women's sports aren't recognized like men's sports. In high school, maybe not so much, but like in university? Our team had a better record than the men's team and yet, the men had more stuff and we're winning. So, when I'm here playing professionally, we still have less fans and even the top teams, they don't get a lot of fans, but yet, if you look at the men's game, they have a lot, even if they aren't a good team. So, I just feel like there's a gender discrepancy in sports.

Another player shared her experience about how, despite her team being highly ranked, they still received less fan support:

[The response to men's teams] was a different vibe. Guys always get more publicity and more advertisement, even with professional sports. You're looking at WNBA vs. NBA or even, playing overseas. Men's sports events always do better than women's, unless the woman's team is top in the league, then you start to get fan aide. Even still, my [pro team] is highly ranked and we still rarely get fans, and we don't have a men's team. We went to a men's game yesterday and they weren't that good to be honest, but they had so many fans. We only got a lot of fans that day, because people stayed for our game. I've just noticed that [women's sport] doesn't really matter. On my other [pro] team, [the men] had their own [distinct] facility from ours. Just to see the dynamics with the physiotherapists, they had homes on residency, vehicles, dental coverage. Our team? We didn't really make a lot of money, and we didn't have sponsors like the men's team or a lot of the things they had.

Another professional player shared her experience emphasizing that male professional athletes get better contracts: "After talking to my pro [male] friends, looking at their contracts and what they are offered, their services? I was like: 'really?!' The amount of money they made a month was insane. They made six times more than me."

In summary, all of the participants shared that they often noticed the physical and material dominance of their male counterparts. This dominance was evidenced by how the male players not only dominated male spaces to the exclusion of female players, but also received better opportunities and more institutional and public support at every level of play.

Discussion

The findings reported in this chapter reveal several important aspects related to the specific ways that gender operated for the female athletes in this study. Firstly, many of the athletes expressed ideas about how, in order to be taken seriously and to avoid exclusion, they were expected to perform and style themselves in sport in traditionally masculine ways. These "masculine" ways of engaging with sport included matching the level of "aggression, force and skill" of male players (Messner, 1992, p. 167 as cited in Cooky & McDonald, 2005), which, as argued Messner (1992) and Cooky and McDonald (2005), is a common expectation for female athletes. As was found in this study, Cooky and McDonald (2005) also found that girls who were perceived as more traditionally feminine (wearing makeup, delicate, etc.) were constructed as less skilled and were taken less seriously as athletes. Therefore, expressions of traditional femininity were perceived as markers of weakness and a lack of skill, underpinned by the idea that, overall, women were less athletically viable than men, with men held up as the standard of playing well (Cooky & McDonald, 2005). These social conventions made it necessary for the participants to prove their worth in order to be included in male dominated athletic spaces (Cooky & McDonald, 2005). These rules of engagement were reinforced through the media, role modelling, and interpersonal experiences, thus

shaping the parameters of expected gender roles in sport (Cooky & McDonald, 2005; Messner, 2002).

Attitudes about masculinity and femininity were also expressed by the participants through discussions about body image. Many of the athletes expressed concerns about how their muscular physiques and, sometimes, height were taken up as masculine. As Heywood and Dworkin (2003) argue, since femininity within athletic spaces is often constructed as something interpreted as “(hetero)sexually attractive” (p. 88) and masculinity as achievement, female athletes often grapple with the fine line between strong bodies as empowering and strong bodies as masculine and unappealing. These powerful ideologies center the male gaze on their bodies and the participants grappled with that fine line as their deep athleticism and strong muscular bodies were sometimes perceived as a potential impediment and threat to their femininity.

Partially informing this delicate athletic gender performance dance was societal homophobia. Previous research shows that the association between women’s sport and lesbianism has been a prevalent theme since at least the 1940s and summons female athletes to avoid lesbian labelling by engaging in “female apologetic” behaviours that counter their athletic prowess with actions that serve to prove their heterosexuality (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005; Cahn, 1993; Hardy, 2015). These gender expectations also impose restrictions on female athletes’ athleticism by keeping players between the boundaries of traditional femininity and being *too good* at sport, which often links them to lesbianism and thus reinforces gender expectations and norms. As shared by the participants, many of the athletes constructed themselves as “tomboys,” which appeared to function as both a strategic and protective identity (Craig & LaCroix, 2011). The tomboy identity was protective for the participants by providing a rationale for their deep athletic participation that circumvents assumptions about sexuality. As a strategic tool, the tomboy identity also granted

legitimacy to athletes seeking access to male-dominated spaces by marking them as worthy of being taken seriously.

Secondly, the participants' *tomboy*ness was further complicated by race (Blackness). In addition to being protective and strategic, the tomboy identity, for Black players in particular, may have also simply reflected Black cultural (and hip-hop cultural) norms of the time period. As expressed by many of the participants, it was simply cool to dress in baggy clothes, and the athletic gear was practical given their athletically intensive lifestyles. Accordingly, while the athletes in this study were aware of the associations to sexuality of their tomboy identities, heavy athletic participation, and strong bodies, many were grappling with how to navigate and fit into these athletic and cultural conventions of the basketball world, while also expressing their heterosexuality. In thinking through these ideas, while aware of these gender expectations and relations to sexuality, the participants also just simply wanted to play basketball at the highest level possible without all the labelling and stereotyping. Many expressed that they felt that that type of fluidity was more achievable in their playing era than in the current climate, because associations to sexuality are now more readily and rigidly attached.

In these ways, these findings emphasize the importance of temporality in shaping the intersectional experiences of the participants, particularly regarding sexuality. The ways in which the athletes thought about their own athletic dispositions and linkages to sexuality were largely shaped by what the participants viewed as a period of time where there was more fluidity and space to defy gender expectations without rigid associations to sexuality. Furthermore, this perceived flexibility was also modulated by historical understandings about racialized Black women and needs to be contextualized generationally, as the participants were experiencing these things within a time

period when, within Black cultural circles, fashion, style trends, and cultural reference points frequently challenged traditional gender conventions.²⁶

Hence, while the participants shared some of the gendered experiences outlined in the scholarly literature, a key limitation of that literature is that the ideas about gender and sport focus on the experiences of White middle-class female athletes (Bruening, 2005). As Cahn (1993) argues, historically speaking, Black women have been positioned outside of dominant ideas about womanhood and girlhood and their high performance in sport is read as less of an affront to their femininity and gender expectations and instead, more of a reflection of their animalistic (and also highly sexual) and masculine nature, which weakens the link to [homo]sexuality. Therefore, the intensity of how Black women experience the association between their athleticism and sexuality may differ from that of their White counterparts.

Furthermore, unlike their White counterparts, Black women also have to contend with different beauty ideals. Research shows that, due to race intersecting with gender, Black women have different and more flexible cultural standards in regard to body type and must navigate a different set of beauty ideals, as their Blackness—including skin tone, facial features, body types, and hair textures—tends to position them entirely outside of European beauty standards (Bond & Cash, 1992; Bryant, 2013; Craig, 2002; Jefferson & Stake, 2009; Mabry et al., 2003; Makkar & Strube, 1995; Milkie, 1999; Parker et al., 1995; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004; Thompson, 2008, 2009). These racial differences may have also shaped the athletes' thoughts about gender in distinct ways, specifically regarding body image, as they noted the differences in the ways that White female players presented in comparison to Black ones. As such, these findings reveal how gender, when interacting with race, creates specific experiences and barriers distinct from those

²⁶ D'Amico (2019) unpacks this challenging and complicating of gender norms within the hip-hop generation, which includes Black youth who are/were part of generation X and Y (millennials).

of Black men and White women. While there was some overlap regarding gender discrimination, race intersected with those gendered experiences to produce different and complex meanings and understandings. The participants found specific ways to distinguish themselves from some of the narrow gender associations, defining themselves in ways that made the most sense for them and their goals, thus, redefining, circumventing, and pushing back on what traditional gender expectations meant for them as high-level athletes, who were both Black and female.

Thirdly, as race and gender intersect, the Black women in this study occupied a liminal space somewhere between Black and White femininities, Black masculinity, heteronormativity, and the suspicion of homosexuality. While gender expectations were similar in how the mimicry of male counterparts defined skill level, and femininity was seen as an athletic impediment, what is distinct about Black women here is how the parameters of femininity differed and associations to masculinity and lesbianism were somewhat tempered by historical ideas about Black dominance and superiority in sport that extends to Black women. Further complicating the gendered experiences of Black women in sport is the ways in which they have to face a distinctive “history of un/gendering that annul[s] Black women’s status as human and as female” that goes beyond the “gender norms and heterosexism” prevalent in women’s sport more broadly (Douglas, 2019, p. 335). This un/gendering marks Black women as fundamentally outside of traditional White womanhood, crafting a distinct experience and social location. As a result, the Black women in this study demonstrated the development of an athletic disposition distinct from that of their White counterparts in the ways that it not only augmented male hyper-masculine athletic dispositions, but also challenged gender expectations grounded in White femininity, such as through their style of dress and aesthetic, while also challenging rigid associations to sexuality.

The complexities of racial differences in athletic experiences are also evident in how athletic spaces for sports like basketball within the GTA context may be limited due to reluctance from

public facilities like recreation centres to allow large numbers of Black youth to engage in unstructured and unsupervised play, largely due to fears of attracting crime and disruptive behaviours. While these attitudes are not well documented in the literature specific to the GTA context and were not explicitly identified by the athletes as a race issue, many of the interviewees shared that access to unstructured and unsupervised gym time was a challenge, thus affecting affected them in particular as female athletes, because in addition to the sometimes exclusion or being played soft because they are girls, gym access may have also been limited due to race (Bascaramurty, 2017). The interlocking nature of race and gender creates barriers that are distinct from Black males and/or White women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, while Black men may face racial barriers to accessing to gyms, once they find one, the study participants shared that they often dominated the space. This demonstrates how gendered racism presents specific barriers for Black female athletes that are distinct from both their White female and Black male counterparts, as race and gender both shape how they experience access to gyms. Class—understood here as the athletes’ need to find additional space and travelling out of their communities—also shapes this experience and sometimes incurs additional expenses through gym memberships or finding different ways to access gyms outside of their teams. Consequently, these additional barriers required more time commitment, navigation, and financial expense from the participants.

These experiences also further emphasize the importance of race-gender analysis because, despite all of that hard work and resisting barriers, the vast majority of the athletes reported that their male counterparts also dominated the athletic space through the differences in opportunities and support at all levels of play. At the collegiate levels, male athletes often receive more attention from fans and financial support from the university. Professionally, they are also paid significantly more in the NBA and overseas and with more perks. These findings echo the scholarly research which

asserts that men's sport dominate athletic spaces (Dabovic, 2002; James, 2005; Lee, 1992; Lenskyj, 1990, 2003), resulting in a ghettoization of women's sport that begins with early socialization that teaches both genders to centre men (Messner, 2002) and provides significantly less professional opportunities and financial compensation to women (Duru, 2015). In these ways, Black female athletes face various additional barriers to athletic competition, and with significantly less payoffs in comparison to their male counterparts. Race and gender collide in these ways by requiring the athletes in this study to work even harder to successfully engage in and benefit from competitive sport. For example, the participants had to get up earlier to get access to gym spaces that would allow them to practice informally. They would sometimes also have to negotiate access to that space through high school staff or custodians. Sometimes, this working harder was also reflected in the extra financial expense needed to find informal practice space and the effort and time required to travel to those gyms.

Therefore, while the participants shared experiences of racial marginalization with their Black male peers, as well as experiences of gendered marginalization with their White female counterparts regarding the overall domination of men in competitive sport, the intersection of race and gender modulated those experiences by creating distinct outcomes and challenges. As such, the nuanced gendered experiences of the participants add an additional layer of complexity to understanding the aspirational and navigational capitals they possessed. Through the navigation of gender barriers, the findings in this chapter reveal how the participants not only grappled with educational and institutional barriers, which they navigated with informal networks of support as discussed in Chapter 5, but also how they had to circumvent specific gender barriers that were modulated by race and were still able to stay focused on their athletic scholarship goals. However, as previously discussed in Chapter 5, this additional aspirational and navigational capital was largely dependent on informal networks for knowledge sharing and social support.

Chapter 8: Playing While Black

Further contextualizing and compounding all of the contradictory and complex gender expectations faced by the athletes and discussed in Chapter 7, the participants shared the additional ways that race shaped their experiences as Canadian basketball athletes seeking athletic scholarships and playing in U.S. and international contexts. This chapter further explores how race continually complicated their understandings and learnings of gender stereotypes and expectations, as well as their scholarship aspirations. While most of the study participants avoided naming race explicitly, it emerged as a marginalizing factor through discussions regarding: 1) the geographical racialization of teams during the “getting looks” phase; 2) the racialization of players due to style of play; and 3) in the perceptions of player aggression and, sometimes, resultant differential treatment and exclusion.

The Geographical Racialization of Teams

While pursuing athletic scholarships during the “getting looks” phase (see Chapter 5), many of the participants shared that their club/rep and AAU teams within the GTA tended to be racially homogenous. This racial homogeneity was also shaped by geography as many of the participants identified which teams were “White teams” or “Black teams” based on their location within the GTA. For example, teams based in Toronto proper were predominantly Black, as were teams in the East end (Scarborough, Pickering, Ajax). On the West end of the GTA, teams based in cities and areas like Brampton, Mississauga, and Etobicoke were identified as a little more racially mixed, but still predominantly Black teams, with the exception of a club team based in Mississauga called the Sultan Prospects, which was constructed by the participants as a predominantly White and non-Black team and tended to have more affluent players.

Predominantly White teams were found in places like Oakville, Burlington, Hamilton, and parts of York region. Outside of the GTA entirely in smaller towns, the teams were identified as

White, and the participants were keenly aware of the racial dynamics and compositions of their various teams. These elements played a role in their choosing which teams to try out and play for.

One participant shared how she could identify the composition of a team based on location:

Back then, [teams were separated by race]. I say the small GTA, and the west end teams were predominately Black. You know what I mean? The Hamilton teams were predominately White so, it's just about where you're at. At that time, there were a lot more Black people concentrated in the GTA and then a lot of us moved out into Ajax, Pickering, Mississauga, and Brampton.

In identifying how teams were often racially homogenous, one participant identified how there would be a token²⁷ Black player on predominantly White teams, and how she also could identify the racial composition of teams based on location: "When you are playing for a certain team like in Hamilton or something, you knew you would probably get that one token colored person, so you knew [the dynamics], and it was dependent on your area, right?" Another participant elaborated on this observation, explaining how token Black players would be treated on predominantly White teams:

When you're going south Ontario, north Ontario, you will never really see a Black girl on those teams that would be the star player or the shooter. They always have their core group of girls, who are usually White, who run the team and they have certain roles, and if they do put a Black girl on the team, it's to be the rebounder, it's to be *that* girl. They never really train her to be in the group or inclusive on the team. I noticed that a lot. I don't know about the GTA really, but I do notice when you're going more north or south Ontario, you'll see that a lot.

In this passage, the participant highlighted not only how geography shaped the composition of teams, but also how the token Black player would be treated with limited opportunities for

²⁷ Tokenism refers to how minority or racialized groups—in this case, Black women—are included to such a small extent within an organization or institution that they experience hypervisibility, marginalization, higher workloads, social isolation, and less support and opportunity for advancement (Kanter, 2008; Strohine & Brandi, 2011). On the surface, the presence of a token can represent diversity and inclusion; however, given the fact that they are often the only one in their group or one of the few, their experiences can be quite problematic and fraught with barriers, particularly *because* their very presence as a token suggests inclusion and equality (Kanter, 2008; Strohine & Brandi, 2011).

advancement. While the lack of Black players on teams could also reflect the few Black people living in the area, the treatment on the team suggests a type of exclusion.

While almost all the participants played on predominantly Black teams, one athlete actually did play on one of those predominantly White teams prior to high school. She shared some of the challenges she faced:

Yeah, I played on mostly Black teams, but when I was younger, I had a lot of White girls on my team and that dynamic was harder because we'd travel out of town. You felt like you were out of place because you weren't really wanted. You wouldn't get calls [from the referees], because obviously [you're in] their hometown. Parents after the game would be in their [the referee's] face. Players would be in their face, so, for me, that was a hard part in the game: learning how to play against five people, but then add another two. That's seven so, you're always playing against more than five people. It started to get a little hard because my dad was the one getting kicked out of games sometimes, because if you're not getting the calls and the girls are fouling you and you have cuts?

In this passage, the athlete described how, when she played on a predominantly White team, she experienced differential treatment through the ways in which the referees would not make calls in her favour. In addition, she shared how the crowd and opposing players would also aggressively advocate against her in ways that put her at a competitive disadvantage. These experiences are further discussed in the discussion section of this chapter; yet, this experience highlights the nature of the challenges experienced by some of the athletes playing on predominantly White teams.

These experiences were not only prevalent pre-university, but also emerged in collegiate play. Another player described her experience playing in Canadian universities upon returning from a U.S. school. She noted that she felt that she had to walk on eggshells when playing on a predominantly White university team: "That was the difficult adjustment for me. I found myself walking on eggshells all the time because everyone was just so fragile. Like, holy shit, I am so over this!" She continued to describe the differences she noticed upon her return to Canada after playing on predominantly Black university teams in the United States:

Well, when I was playing [at] HBCUs, there were Black people everywhere and even in Toronto it was [always Black people]. It wasn't until I came back to the University [in Canada] that I found myself uncomfortable because I was surrounded by White people all the time and that's what was different for me: [having to adjust] to the Canadian game was very difficult because in the States, people don't really pull punches down there.

In these passages, the athlete described how she felt out of place playing on predominantly White teams, as the expectations and feel of the teams were different. She described feeling like she had to be overly cautious as to not offend.

Others discussed how this racialization of teams and the different feels of teams based on their racial composition were often shaped by preconceived ideas about players. One participant alluded to how assumptions based on geography, which were indirectly linked to race, would lead to stereotyping that sometimes proved to be wrong:

[With that type of thinking] you knew what you were getting and also in that sense, there was this stigma that if a team was predominately Black—they're going to be street-ballers—and that if it's not [predominantly Black] then they [the players] can just shoot. So, in a sense, we were hindering both sides, because we already had pre-conceived notions of what one or the other can do and it wasn't just them doing it, we were doing it to them, too. So, we were all in that pot and sometimes, you go into a game with those preconceived notions and you're wrong.

Here, the athlete explained how the racial makeup of a team tended to determine the perception of the players' skill sets. These experiences with how geography shaped the racial makeup of teams and the experiences of Black players on them suggest that team choice, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, was not only about word of mouth, playing with the right coaches, or the geographical proximity of the team, but also about appraising one's racial comfort level and the opportunities that would be afforded once on certain teams. These additional factors were things that the players were aware of and sometimes factored into their decisions regarding which teams to play for. One player, who also played professionally, remarked that this type of racialization and differential treatment existed at all levels of play, but varied based on team composition. She recalled that her university teams in America and Canada were predominantly Black at best, or racially

diverse at the very least, but now that she plays on a predominantly White team, she more readily sees the difference as she is the token Black girl and is identified as such. Therefore, for some of the athletes, these dynamics persisted at all levels of play—be it in high school or at university, in the United States, Canada, or internationally, including professionally—and had implications for the racial comfort level and sense of belonging experienced by the players.

Fundamentally Sound or Jumping Out of the Gym?

Attached to the racialization of teams based on geography were racial assumptions about players' skills and abilities. These racial assumptions were not limited to geography, but also constructed through ideas about style of play and player dispositions. Many of the athletes were quick to note that race was not a significant factor in their experience; however, when probed about style of play, they remarked that Black players were often seen as innately athletic and talented. Coaches would refer to them as “able to jump out of the gym” and as “shake and bake” players, while White players were overwhelmingly referred to as “fundamentally sound” players or players who could shoot well. *Fundamentally sound* here refers to a more structured style of play that is methodical, heavily rehearsed, and relies more on routine, repetition, and predictability. A fundamentally sound player is one who has mastered or strongly adheres to particular playing conventions, which adhere to a set of fundamental mechanics and basketball skills. As a participant mentioned, it is a style of play that caters less to athleticism and is more of a “thinking game.” Players have set roles and offensive tactics, and outcomes and scoring options are more predictable. Therefore, this style of play is constructed as strategic and smart. In constructing White players as fundamentally sound or shooters, it is implied that they possess a skillset that is the result of their perceived discipline, practice, hard work, intelligence—and, therefore, merit. This style of play was perceived as dominant on mostly White teams.

In contrast, the style of play described as “jump out the gym” in Black players is more improvisational and relies more heavily on athleticism, thinking on your feet, and creating scoring opportunities as they present themselves. Moves are quick and explosive, and players more readily communicate non-verbally. While there may be an initial strategy in place, players may read the opposing team and can spontaneously change course. Players also talk trash²⁸ to their opponents as a form of friendly competition and as a way of getting in their heads. As a result, this style of play is often faster and more assertive. However, this approach to play is typically constructed in Black players as undisciplined and the result of raw talent and/or biology. The rationale is that, while this approach can yield good results and is often entertaining to watch because of its excitement and flashiness, it is perceived as the result of innate ability, rather than deliberate practice, intelligence, and discipline.

The players noted how their style of play was constructed in these ways and as markedly different from their White and non-Black counterparts. While subtle, it was implied that fundamentally sound play was not necessarily superior, but more desirable or acceptable:

[Sighs] I don't know, I wouldn't say that it [fundamentally sound] is the better way of playing. The word fundamentally sound, it's such a... [sighs], there's such a stigma to it. You may not be fundamentally sound and still be an amazing player and (vice versa), but there's so much stacked against us [as Black players] already and that's just one more thing you need in your arsenal, so that you can be as good as you can be, so if you have to shoot 100 shots a day or do the same routine every day to kind of pick it up and make it second nature...

In this passage, the athlete alludes to the ways in which playing in the “fundamentally sound” style was seen as more desirable and, therefore, felt like an additional barrier as players who learned

²⁸ Trash talk refers to a practice within competitive sport where athletes engage in a playful insult-talk. Some argue that this trash talk, specifically in regard to Black players is an extension of African-American traditions of “playing the dozens”, where individuals engage in playful insulting banter, which is an improvisational exercise in wit, wordplay, and performance (Chimezie, 1976; Davidson, 1998; Eveslage & Delaney, 1998; Lefever, 1981; Spears, 2001). Chimezie (1976) argues that this practice likely originates from Western African practices in Ghanaian and Igbo (Nigerian) communities, where it is called *Ikocha Nkocha*. This practice was likely maintained by the diaspora throughout the Transatlantic Slave Trade, explaining its widespread, intergenerational, diasporic, and contemporary practice.

to play in what was constructed as a more “jump out the gym” style, were taken up as less skilled. There was not a marrying of the two styles, but rather one (fundamentally sound) held as the standard, while the other was deemed to be a less desirable variation.

For many of the participants, the construction of fundamentally sound players, who were understood as White players, was also often framed through discussions about discipline. Players who were not fundamentally sound would be seen as good and talented players who relied on innate skill rather than practiced skill, bringing into question how hard they had to work to be “good.” One athlete shared how some would assume Black players did not have to work as hard because their athleticism was innate, “Just because of my build, people thought that I didn’t train as much with weights. They just thought it was genetic, and I’m like: ‘No, I have to work just as hard as you do, too!’” Another player shared how she felt that she was expected to play in a way that mimicked the style of play of White players, thus demonstrating what kind of play was valued by White coaches:

The White kids [were perceived] as more level-headed, playing a more finesse game. That kind softer perception [of White women] carries all the way through into athletics but in [the States], there was not one White person on any my teams. [Playing on White teams] was definitely a different game. They [White coaches] want you to play with a lot of elegance, whatever that means to them, but if you’re very athletic and moving around? We’re not these soft flowy [players], you know? If you’re dribbling through someone, they might say the “carry call.” So, I think that was the difference. Especially here [in Canada], there’s a style of game that they like to see, and the style of game is not the style of game that most [Black] people would like to play. They [White coaches] don’t like very strong, flashy [players].

Another participant shared a similar perspective on playing with White Canadian teams:

The style of play was a lot more subdued than I was used to. The style of play [in Canada] lends itself to...if you aren’t as athletic, you’re not going to be left behind because [it makes space] for people who are [not athletic]. It is a thinking game up here, whereas, in the States, if you’re not athletic, just sit all the way down! You’re a pylon basically.

These two players outlined how the standard of play expected on predominantly Black teams significantly differed from the standard of play on predominantly White teams. Black teams often expected more athleticism and boldness, while White teams, which would be Canadian university

teams and club teams outside the GTA, expected their players to be “fundamentally sound” in their style of play.

Considering that the “jump out the gym” style was constructed as undisciplined, it would also be read as aggressive or mean. One player shared how upon her return from the United States, in playing on a Canadian university team, the aggressive style of play that was rewarded there was now condemned:

I think that when I came back here, the level of aggression in my game [was different]? When I came back here, I had so many personal fouls in my first season playing. I fouled out of a good 50-60% of my games because it was fine to be that way in the States. It was totally fine to talk shit, stare somebody down, you know? Kind of just be overly aggressive and then coming back here and all the White girls be like: “Oh that’s so mean! She’s such a mean girl.”

The aggression the athlete refers to is not in reference to violence, but assertiveness. Some players noted that, while they played on predominantly Black teams in their pre-university years and continued to do so once in the States, they had still been exposed to these different ideas about styles of play. Some of the participants then had to confront these differences in playing expectations on Canadian collegiate teams (USports/CIS) and how their more aggressive style of play was read as “mean.” This realization of differences in expectations required the athletes to balance what was working and emphasized in one context with that same approach being frowned upon in another. One player shared how her style of play was read as having an “attitude” because she wasn’t acting the way they [the coaches] expected her to:

Because of how I carried myself, people would say I have an attitude. I never understood that and never fully agreed with it. Now that I’m older, though, I understand why they said that. It’s because I’m not acting the way you expect me to. Sometimes I was also very stubborn as well [and would push back], so even when I respond the way you expect, I was still given that: “You have an attitude.”

In this passage, the player referred to how her disposition and comportment were read as having an attitude because she was not easily deferent and compliant in athletic spaces. Another

player shared similar sentiments, noting that the criticisms received were often the result of players not acting the way others wanted or expected them to:

I think we have expectations of people and when they don't act the way we want them to act, we put a label on them [having a bad attitude]. [For example], when you do something or when a coach tells me something, I would respond, like shrug my shoulders. Or if you walk into a gym a certain way, if you don't say something or if you stretch a certain way or if your face looks a certain way, you are being perceived a certain way.

While many players noted racial differences in expectations in disposition and style of play based on whether they were in the United States or Canada, or on a predominantly White or Black team, some had to adjust their style of play to fit in. One participant shared how the style of play expected of her in Canada differed from what she experienced in predominantly Black teams in America. While, in the United States, she was too soft, upon her return to Canada, although they valued her abilities, she was expected to be "rough" as a Black player:

Before going to the States, I was being more groomed towards being that [White Canadian university] player. Basically, when I went to the States to play basketball, I felt like the White girl. That was the style of play [emphasized in Canada]. When I came here [predominantly White university and team in Canada], I think I felt that the people in the stands thought some rah-rah shit was about to pop off in the stands or on the courts. That's what they probably expected of me. I was always curious over the years but have never been lucky enough to see anyone else's scouting reports [to see how they perceived her style of play]. That was the perception from other teams and coaches [in Canada], a general sense of: "Oh shit", when I stepped on court. There was a lot of expectation because I think I had that aggression and I had balls! I never really found it in me to care, but I did feel some kind of expectation there [to be aggressive].

In discussing her playing experience in Canada, this same player shared how her coach was pleased that she was "adapting" to playing in the "fundamentally sound" way, rather than the "aggressive way" and commended her for it:

One of the things that the coach said to me apparently stuck with me forever, because I still think about it now. It's when she said to me: "You know, you're like the poster child for [Canadian University] basketball. You would have never made it here coming out of high school, but you came in, and not only are you keeping up, but you're also flourishing." She was so surprised [by how well I played], and I didn't know how to take it. Who else are you having this conversation with, you know? Who else on the team did you say this to? Why, you know what I'm saying? What the fuck does she mean by that?

This passage highlights how fundamentally sound play, within the interuniversity Canadian space, was held up as a standard for many athletes and upon their return to Canada, they often faced challenges adjusting to the different athletic expectations.

In light of these racial binaries regarding style of play, other participants grappled with how their athleticism was read by their coaches. One participant shared how her coaches emphasized the athleticism of her team over her skill, reinforcing belief in the binary of innate skill vs. hard work:

The Sultans team was fundamentally sound, and they could shoot out the gym, but we also have shooters on our team, you know? Because they always refer to the [predominantly Black] team as being wild, they always made us feel like we were the wild ones and now we have to play disciplined [to play against the Sultans], and we can't do all that shake and bake stuff. If their point guard has really good handles and tries to cross one of our players, that's the nature of the game. Crossing people up is inevitable, but why is it that if a White girl crosses people up, she's not seen as doing that shake and bake stuff, [but when we do it], we're being undisciplined with the ball? We noticed that, but we didn't have the words to explain it back then except to say: "She's doing the same thing."

In comparing the players to a White team and focusing on innate athleticism rather than skill, many participants felt that the coaches were ignoring their potential, limiting the kind of skills they could develop, and had double standards, with a Black player's style of play often seen as wild, undisciplined, and in need of taming. Many participants articulated that the same behaviours were read differently in players based on race. When a White or non-Black player did something, it was seen as the result of skill or smartness; however, when a Black player did it, it was because of raw talent or a lack of discipline. One participant articulated that White players had an advantage because the majority of referees were White; therefore, White players were speaking, or playing, in the same language:

The White player—and I'm trying to keep my biases out of it because of the conditions of institutionalized racism—get it easier than everyone else, because they're speaking the language of the refs who are 90% White. So, they know how to [move] within the university in Canada. I mean, it's still a token game for Black players, so that whole level of comfort [that they have] [is also how] Black people are always [constructed as] these "running and aggressive" people.

In this passage, the participant highlighted how, as because White players and officials dominate within the Canadian athletic space, White players have an advantage over Black players because Black players are positioned as tokens and have to play in ways that are intelligible to the dominant group.

As a result, many players felt that this style of play binary boxed them in athletically, making it difficult for people to see what they could do, as many expected them to play in a “Black style,” which was constructed as naturally athletic and flashy. One participant expressed deep frustration because, despite Black players showing the ranges of their skillset, they would still be pigeonholed into particular roles, which emphasized their athleticism:

I’m pretty strong and I feel like they tried to put me in a box to be that strong Black girl, which I understand, but there’s so much more range to my game other than just what I look like or my physical ability. I feel like it all depends on the coach. If the coach sees something in that player and they can get past [the race of the player] and not put her in a box and actually just develop her as a player, then she can go really far. They put players in a box based on race. Maybe it’s subconscious—but that’s usually how it goes in the game.

Another participant expressed frustration as she felt that these constructions limit the kinds of players Black players can be stating that: “It was really annoying to me because I don’t really think it’s their place to make those decisions and determine what kind of player I should be because I have a style of play. I want you to coach the game and what’s going on.” Another participant echoed these sentiments:

I feel like there is stereotyping. If there’s a White player on a team, they’re going to be the shooter and the tall Black girl is going to be the strong rebounder. A lot of coaches sometimes try to put players in a box when they see their race, but maybe that White girl who’s a shooter, maybe *she* is the strongest rebounder and maybe that Black girl, maybe she could be a really good shooter.

Overall, these racial binaries caused many players to feel constrained by the expectations of how they were supposed to play and what playing in a particular style meant to officials and their coaches across contexts. In addition, the players felt frustrated by the consequences of those expectations and their limitations.

Implications: Losing and Excluding

Referees and Hyper-Penalization

The racialization of playing style as a binary went beyond players' feeling boxed in or limited in the ways that coaches developed them or read their skills. There were actual consequences of that labelling, which made it more difficult for athletes to compete and easier for them to lose. For example, many athletes expressed that they were often more harshly penalized for the same behaviours in games in comparison to their White counterparts. In reflecting on her experiences in the United States, one participant posited that this racialization served as a form of control:

They want to control the Black players and tone down our enthusiasm when we play. Why can't we do that? And I feel with Black players, it's natural for us to talk crap, and there were some dirty non-Black players that we played against, who would elbow us while we played. I never noticed that until we played in the States against White teams where you'd actually notice just how clever they are and how they play. I say clever in a bad way because they were very dirty! It's like, tucking your arm and you don't see that girl tucking me? They don't see that, but they'll see when I'm chirpy and talking shit. I eventually learned how to navigate those situations, but growing up, you don't know how to navigate.

Here, the participant shared how the same behaviours were more readily penalized by referees in games with Black players, even when White players engaged in similar—and sometimes worse—behaviours. She felt that White players were able to do anything they wanted, while she as a Black player could not. This is important because, in a game, each player has a set number of fouls they can commit before being ejected from the game. Fouls can result in a change of ball possession, free throws, or a combination of both. If Black players are penalized more heavily, that means that their team will lose possession and, therefore, scoring opportunities more frequently. They may also have to take essential strong players off the court more frequently to avoid them fouling out, which changes court dynamics and diminishes the potential to win. Simply put, harsher court regulation of Black players makes it easier for them to lose.

As one participant noted earlier in sharing her experience of playing on predominantly White teams before high school, this type of control through consequences can be seen as playing *five*

against seven. In basketball, each team has five players on the court, and everyone is matched up with someone defensively based on position. The additional two players to make seven are the referees, which symbolize an advantage for the other team. Therefore, how the style of play is read differently on Black players has real implications for the outcome of the game. One participant shared her experience with referees and the intentionality of their penalization:

One thing that I learned about the referees is that they have an agenda, and I'm not saying that they all want to foul all the Black people, but they know your name and your name is in their mouth as soon as you do anything. Like for me, I was a foul magnet, and they were determined to change that about me. They were willing to change the level of aggression in me, and they were like: "We're going to foul your ass out of every game if you don't cut this shit out." They didn't care about safety or the things that I could do. The fouls that they would call? I had a discussion with one of the refs who was passing after I finished and he was telling me: "You know, we're not going to foul you out of an important game, we're not going to foul out the major players, right?" So, just having that conversation let me know that they know exactly what they're doing. They know what they want to see and they're really aware that they have the ability to dictate the game and they'll do that when they want to and I think that when I came [back to Canada] and was all fashion and fire and not giving a fuck, they were like: "Really!?" [And wanted to put her in her place].

In this passage, the participant posited that this differential treatment led to an overregulation from referees who believed in a particular style of play, which would create a particular type of game and lead them to regulate accordingly to create that. Another player recalled this trend of overregulation from referees during her high school years:

In rep or club back in the day, we would [play against] Hamilton. Their team was White, and we were predominately Black. You could just see the refs give calls in their favour. Even if it was a home game, you could see that they were biased. It's something I've kind of learned to deal with, you know?

Another participant shared her experience with referees and explained how they sometimes acted as a barrier, especially in high-stakes games like championships. The participant described the experiences as having to *"always be on her best behaviour"*:

Participant: I played in high school and one of the biggest shockers for me was, when I played with [an urban Toronto School] and it was all Black girls from the hood, and we were really good and won OFSAA. I'll never forget how we played in Hamilton, [which] is notorious for horrible racial [discrimination][sighs and laughs] of teams. So, we're playing a team that's really good and they're all White girls and we're all Black girls. We're not very

clean cut, rough around the edges, some of us more than others, and we're playing these White girls who are equally as aggressive and equally as gritty. But of course, we get all the horrible calls, and those girls would push us, scratch us, and pull our jerseys and nothing would happen. Their parents are in the stands, and our parents aren't because they are working and doing things and not available to come [in the daytime]. It was always a challenge. I felt like we always had to be on our best behavior regardless of where we were, so that the perception wasn't that we were a bunch of Black girls from the hood playing basketball, you know?

Interviewer: When you said style of play earlier, do you think that in your experience, Black players are perceived in a particular kind of way?

P: Absolutely. We're perceived as more aggressive. It definitely [affected how I was perceived], not necessarily negatively enough to impact me getting a scholarship, but it was always a challenge for me just because I'm very, very, very, very competitive and outwardly emotional, so when I felt something, or had a thought, or disagreed with the referee, it was very apparent, which was something I eventually got under control. Even in college, I went to a school that was of mixed race, and my coach was of the belief that female players don't cuss on the court and held themselves as ladies. I'm like: "What is this, we're playing basketball ?!" It was always a challenge for me to not outwardly show emotion. It wasn't something that fully negatively impacted me, but it was something that came with the package.

This athlete reinforced the ways in which the geography of the team and its associated racial composition shaped the participants' playing experiences. During that championship game, the predominantly Black team played a predominantly White team in front of a White crowd, and the player described how she felt that the team experienced differential treatment from the referees and the crowd, which acted as an additional barrier to winning. The participant also noted that, as a player, she felt the need to always be on her best behaviour because, in addition to style of play and the racial composition of her team, showing emotion was also frowned upon and considered unladylike.

Some players rationalized that they were also perceived as stronger than their White counterparts and, therefore, could not get calls from referees because it was perceived that what was being physically done to them was not as severe, because the Black players were stronger and could withstand it. One player hypothesized that her muscular build helped to shape this perception: "Because I have a pretty muscular build, there were times where I would get fouled or maybe I

would I collide with another player or something, and it was always my fault. If their physique is not so much like mine? It's just because I look stronger." Another participant shared how she felt when the referees were harder on her because of her size and perceived strength:

Participant: I always felt like refs were harder on me because I'm bigger and stronger. It's really frustrating for me as a player and you recognize you are in a position where you could potentially be in foul trouble already and every little touch is: "You're too aggressive," and I always felt like, people either underestimated my frame or overestimated it.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how they overestimated and/or underestimated your frame?

P: Like, if I were to make contact with anybody, it would always be perceived as harder than it [actually] was. It would appear as if I hurt someone. Even if they fell over, they made it seem like I injured the person. That's what I mean by overestimate my strengths. I'm not saying I'm not strong, but I'm not that strong.

I: When they underestimate your strength, what do you mean?

P: Not my physical strength, but my mental strength. They assumed that because I was passionate, I was weak.

When this kind of differential treatment occurred, many players shared that they had to suppress their emotions and not challenge referees in order to not be penalized or to avoid being labelled as "emotional players." Another participant shared how her passion was taken for weakness and was used as something for her opponents to take advantage of, because they knew she would be penalized by the referees over them. Therefore, this differential treatment, which was shaped by geography and race, also determined how players were sometimes treated on the court by officials and the crowd. Sometimes, this differential treatment resulted in additional barriers such as overregulation and excessive foul calls by referees, as well as the need for some player to suppress their emotions as to not be further disadvantaged.

Exclusion

Another consequence of this differential treatment and racialization was exclusion. Some players shared that, for various reasons, including racialization of style of play, they experienced

exclusion from elite teams. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the athletes in this study played on several athletic teams, some of which required extensive travel. Outside of AAU teams that were used as a vehicle to be seen by U.S. scouts, Canadian players could also play on a number of elite amateur club and development teams, where they competed all over the province of Ontario, nationally, and sometimes internationally.

Some players shared that these teams had a lot of “politics,” or, said differently, internal structures and systems that relied on tacit knowledge and networks that were often exclusionary. On many of these teams, race played a key role, as the coaches on these teams were committed to a “fundamentally sound” style of play. Black players, while revered for their talent, were often constructed as un-coachable or as inner-city athletes, with great style and bad attitudes. At the time, these teams also cared a lot about reflecting a White image for the team, because they represented specific regional, provincial, and sometimes national interests, and as such, often selected very few Black players. One participant shared how she came up against this type of thinking when she was trying out for one of the elite teams and kept getting cut:

Well, I think the biggest thing that my race played a part of was when I tried out for [redacted]. I thought there was a lot of politics, personally. I thought I was one of the better girls whenever we tried out, but I’d always get cut. It would always make my coaches upset that I didn’t make the team because I had a really great try out. When I’d come out of the room saying I didn’t make it, people thought I was joking. They literally thought I’d make it, and it was really deflating. Every year I tried to make this team and I kept getting cut. Not everyone is going to like your playing style, and not everyone is going to like what you have to offer. I know there are a lot of politics, and I don’t know whether it’s because I’m Black or because my parents didn’t really have the connections or it’s because I wasn’t really *in*. Maybe I only had one foot in the door. I wasn’t really a part of [the culture], but it was just really frustrating, skill-wise. I was deserving of being part of that team, and I remember it just being this super exciting thing. I also kind of fed into this: “I’m Black, I’m not making it” kind of thing. I do think there’s politics in basketball in general, because I don’t think they choose fairly. Professionally, there’s lot of politics, too, but I never made [this team], yet I was part of [teams of a higher level afterwards]? I came a long way and finally had the chance to be part of [an even more elite team].

In this passage, the athlete shared how she felt excluded from the elite team and its connections, potentially due to race. Another participant shared her experiences with these elite teams and hypothesized that the exclusion was also function of race and class:

I think race has to do with that [the exclusion from elite teams]. A lot of the [elite] teams were White and had few minority girls on them. Like two [out of 12+]? I think class or networks come into this, too. I knew one girl whose mother just asked all the time, and she was everyone's best friend. So, I wasn't sure if I had to be more recognized in the basketball system or my parents needed to be, you know? That dynamic, I was so new to it. I didn't know much about it, but I knew it was unfair. The girls who'd get picked on the team would hate having to defend me [on the court]. I was just one of the players they'd be intimidated by and yet, no matter what, I wouldn't make it. I didn't have a lot of money to donate to anything to [these institutions, either] so, that might have contributed to it, too. I don't know. I want to say that race is the biggest thing to it, but it's hard to tell because there are more Black girls on these teams now. I don't know if it's because the politics are lessening, or the Black girls are getting that much better.

This participant described how getting on to some of the elite teams was also about possessing a certain level and type of social capital—something that she, at the time, felt she did not possess. In addition, she also alluded to tokenism, which meant that, once there were already the obligatory one or two Black girls on the team, she knew her chances of making the team were limited. She did not feel her access to the team was based on skill or merit, but rather her social positioning and race.

Some of these racial differences on elite teams were also propagated by the broader public. One participant noted that online, one of the elite teams she played on would often receive heavy criticism for having more than one Black player on it. She also posited that perhaps the racial dynamics of these teams were less about skill and more about presenting the province (Ontario) and/or country (Canada) as White:

I think it was more about the representation of Canada on an international scale. People often want Canada to be perceived as a primarily White country when really, when you go anywhere in Canada, it is one of the most multicultural places you'll ever be. For there to not be an Asian person, ever, or for there not to be a South Asian person or like Middle Eastern? It kind of seems weird that that [Whiteness] was the portrayal of Canada on an international scale [through these teams].

Another participant echoed this hypothesis as she noticed that, on the elite teams she played for, “there was no Blackness in front of the team. You know there was no Black girl on the posters, no Black girl as the star. It was the White girl that gave the pass that got the recognition.” She also noted that these differences may have persisted because of coaches bringing their lived experience into their coaching styles. She drew on a discussion that her coach (who was White) had, to describe why the White players were playing over the Black players. The coach resented the fact that, during his playing career, “talented” Black players got more playing time even if they weren’t “fundamentally sound.” He described Black players as “these talented motherfuckers [who] get to play,” while characterizing himself as trying so hard and not getting to play. As a result, the coach used his position to retributively reward White players who played in fundamentally sound styles as opposed to the “jump out the gym” Black players. The participant used this example to describe her experience with elite teams in Canada, arguing that elite coaches would engage in favoritism and choosing and giving more playing time to players who reflected the coaches’ playing styles and were often White. Overall, many players noted that ideas about style of play resulted in differential treatment, which would typically lead to being put at a disadvantage in playing situations and through forms of exclusion like poor access to elite teams.

Discussion

The findings in this chapter provide meaningful insights into the role of race and style of play in shaping the experiences of the athletes in this study. Firstly, while the participants usually did not explicitly name race as a marginalizing factor, the role of race emerged through their experiences with the geographical homogeneity of teams and the resultant discomfort and disadvantage experienced in those spaces. These experiences deepen our understanding of sport and team choice (Chapters 4 and 5), as the athletes may also choose teams based not only on proximity, familiarity, and quality of coach, but also on racial comfort and as an exercise in maximizing opportunities by

developing athletically in spaces perceived as more racially supportive and fair. These considerations may require additional navigation on the part of the female athletes, as they also must consider racial acceptance and comfort in their team choices.

Even within a sport like basketball that is contemporarily Black-dominated at many levels, race operates through Whiteness by informing and shaping standards. For example, as early as in middle school, many of the participants came to understand that there were White teams and Black teams within their context of the GTA. The players also discovered that, attached to the geographical racial homogeneity of teams were particular ideas about racial styles of play and, accordingly, how their particular style of play, which was popular and dominant amongst Black players, was perceived as wild, undisciplined, and as a function of talent rather than skill, discipline, hard work, or intelligence. Conversely, the style of play commonly exhibited by White players was constructed as “fundamentally sound” and smart. The athletes learned about these racial dynamics and ascriptions through experiences of penalization and exclusion throughout their playing careers.

These experiences that centered styles of play demonstrate how, as previously argued in Chapter 1, Whiteness can also be understood as a form of cultural capital that shapes sensibilities and therefore, dispositions, making easier the accumulation of social and economic capital, setting the exchange rate by which all forms of capital are appraised and converted. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 2, the dominant group is also privileged through the power to shape social and national epistemologies (Krebs, 2012). These features are exemplified in my findings by how, within Canadian basketball spaces, the participants shared their experiences of penalization by referees and exclusion from elite teams due to the ways in which their style of play was perceived as less valid. This was also observed by the participants, particularly on the predominantly White club teams outside of the GTA and Canadian university teams. In these ways, the dominant style of play for basketball within Canada, outside of Black communities, including on elite teams, was

constructed as the one where “fundamentally sound,” less aggressive, and more methodical styles of play were expected. This style of play appeared to be distinct from that which is popular and often encouraged and practiced within Black communities.

As described by a participant, Canadian basketball is a “thinking game,” which implies that the more athletic and “jump out of the gym” style of play is not fitting and also affirms historical racial scripts, which endow intellectual supremacy to Whites (see also Chapter 4). Although focused on Black male athletes, previous research shows that distinct styles of play in the ways that Black athletes emote and express themselves athletically are important factors in gameplay (Majors, 2017; Sailes, 1996a) and can be “more important than success, fundamental technique, and performance” (Sailes, 1996a, p. 38). Andrews (1996) argues that these differences in style of play and expressive behaviours, which can be animated, are a type of simple freedom exercised by Black athletes in the face of multiple real life race-based barriers, to just be and express excitement, joy, and passion. However, this style of play comes at a cost, as these expressive behaviours (like trash talk as discussed by the participants), are often policed, perceived as abnormal, unsportsmanlike, an affront to the rules, or a “contestation over knowledges of behaviour norms” (Andrews, 1996, p. 57). At the root of this perception is “an attempt to control the Black body” and a historical and cultural failure by the dominant group to understand the behaviours and norms in Black groups (Ibid., pp. 57–58). Therefore, as the counternarratives in this chapter elucidate, the parameters of how Black bodies can behave in social or, in this case, athletic spaces were often dictated by dominant White standards and norms that bestow epistemological and ontological power to the dominant group by marking those who behave outside of those standards as racialized and problematic outsiders.

These attitudes and racial binaries around style of play also reflect a type of racial othering, which dictates and defines the boundaries, currency, and therefore, transferability of athletic skill or capital in Black players. As Carrington (2010a) argues, Black athletes are expected to choose

between being the exceptional athlete, who transcends race and is deferent to the expectations of the dominant group in order to be included (token), or be marked as the *beast*, who is otherized and non-compliant. Thus, I contend that, through experiences of exclusion and differential treatment, conformity into something more intelligible, “acceptable,” passive, and in line with traditional gender and dominant expectations was encouraged in the athletes when playing in predominantly White [and/or Canadian] spaces (Morris, 2007, p. 511).

Upon learning these racial understandings through negative experiences, some of the players had to then engage in the additional labour of using this information to decide how to navigate the athletic terrain in order to position themselves to get the best forms of support and opportunities for scholarship offers. This would frequently (although, not always) mean playing in spaces that were predominantly Black, perhaps because those spaces and the people in them (e.g., coaches and players) were more familiar and accepting of that style of play and expression, and, thus, were better equipped to support and develop the athletes and recognize their talents, rather than trying to suppress or change them into something more in-line with dominant expectations. Theoretically speaking, these environments were probably more comfortable for the players, as they were probably able to foster a better sense of belonging by being less exposed to challenges due to racial binaries about styles of play. As Smith (2007) argues, 90% of Black female collegiate athletes in the NCAA are concentrated within basketball or track and field, with racial sense of belonging, along with financial barriers and parental time investment, acting as deterrents to these athletes’ engagement with other sports. As such, the findings in this study may also complicate discourses on racial sense of belonging in sport by demonstrating how racial sense of belonging may also affect Black athletes within a Black-dominated sport.

Therefore, I argue that style of play can also shape the systems of inclusion and exclusion created by Whiteness within competitive sport, as these systems are defined through a juxtaposition

with Blackness that devalues the forms of expression from Black bodies, marking their physical skill as intrinsic and detached from intellectual skill, thereby positioning Blackness as inferior and homogeneous. Furthermore, considering that, as discussed in Chapter 7, women's sport garners less support and opportunity at all levels of play due to gender inequality and inequity, these racial dynamics compound the types of marginalization and systemic barriers faced by Black female athletes. This privileging of a slower, less athletic style of play, which tends to be conflated with Whiteness within Canadian basketball spaces, serves to disadvantage Black players with a more athletic, assertive, and improvisational style of play, additionally complicating the rewarding and accumulation of multiple forms of capital from basketball within that context. These racial understandings regarding style of play explicate how Black players and, more specifically, Black female players may experience sport within the Canadian context, as well as how their opportunities and experiences may be shaped by their proximity to dominant styles of play and racial sense of belonging.

Secondly, gender plays a significant role in the ways in which the racialization of play operates. Race and racialization play an integral role in shaping how styles of play are constructed, serving as a site of marginalization for Black athletes, as Black styles of play tend to be perceived as more talent-driven and innate, resulting in a devaluation and trivialization of work ethic, suspicion around ability, and sometimes, penalization and exclusion. However, while the parameters of how Black female players play is shaped by the dominant ideas of Whiteness, they are also shaped by White femininity, in addition to the style of play of Black males (see Chapter 7), which positions Black female athletes as squarely on the periphery. These findings further demonstrate how Black women's experiences within sport are specific and distinct from those of their White female and Black male counterparts (Crenshaw, 1991).

Previous analyses on Serena Williams, a tennis star, documented such experiences around style of play, penalization, and exclusion, and how the intersection of race and gender shapes the experiences of differential treatment for Black female athletes in competitive sport. Throughout her career, despite her unprecedented success, Williams has endured incessant criticism, ridicule, and penalization due to her style of play and physicality. This includes relentless gender-questioning and othering, suspicion about the source of her athletic skill, disproportionate drug testing, a construction of her strength and ability as abnormal, critiques of her emotionality and tendency to challenge calls made by officials, as well as racial taunts from crowds (Al Jazeera, 2018; Associated Press, 2018; Chase, 2018; Douglas, 2005, 2012, 2019; Grant, 2018; Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne, & Jones, 2018; Newman, 2018; Raggs & Boren, 2018; Schultz, 2005; Waldstein, 2018). The aforementioned experiences have put Williams at a competitive disadvantage many times throughout her career—which, at the time of writing, most recently was evidenced through the scandal around her 2018 U.S. Open finals match. During the match, Williams’ talking back and challenging of the officials resulted in penalizations and the loss of points, which may have cost her a championship and the opportunity to match the world record for the number of women’s singles Grand slam titles (Raggs & Boren, 2018; Waldstein, 2018). Douglas (2019), in particular, argues that Williams’ lack of conformity to dominant norms in her sport contribute to her persistent marginalization. Williams’ experiences demonstrate the ways in which a Black woman excelling in competitive sport, albeit a White-dominated one, is disruptive to the status quo and expected athletic, race, and gender dispositions. The differential treatment of Serena Williams through constant criticisms and penalizations serves as a way of indicating Williams’ positioning as outside of dominant gender, race, and sport norms, while reinforcing and maintaining dominant styles of play by competitively disadvantaging players like Serena when they are not in compliance. As Schultz (2005) argues, Black female athletes are frequently “ideologically coded and understood through notions of masculinity”

(p. 347) and often read as outside of natural woman-ness due to their muscularity, strength, and ways of presenting and playing.

This example demonstrates the liminal space occupied by Black women (discussed in Chapter 7) informed by not only the norms of White femininity and Black masculinity, but also by White dispositions regarding style of play. When players like Serena play in dynamic, aggressive, and expressive ways in strong, muscular bodies and then subsequently have their gender and humanity questioned, historical racial ideologies and scripts about Black people being creatures of the body and not of mind are invoked. Williams' athletic success is not read as the result of hard work and discipline (mind), but rather of some abnormal, superhuman, animalistic, and innate physical prowess afforded to her through her Blackness—or worse, as the result of drug enhancement (Grant, 2018; Miller, 1998). This athletic prowess also comes at the expense of intellect, which explains the frequent criticism of Williams' emotionality and talking back, as these racial scripts also ascribe the lack of discipline and self-control to Black athletes (Carrington, 2010a). These readings of Williams reinforce the elevation of White standards and styles of play (or, more abstractly, way of being or presenting) as normative, while also diminishing the hard work of Black athletes and creating suspicion around their success.

In so doing, Black female players like Williams are punished for not conforming in their style of play by facing additional barriers, such as additional opponents, including the officials and audience. This, in turn, affects the sense of belonging of Black female athletes because, as described by the participants who had experienced playing on predominantly White teams or observed the racial dynamics of those playing environments, they were being reminded that their belonging may have been contingent on their deference to dominant standards (Hurtado, 1989). Therefore, through exploring the experiences of Serena Williams with those of the participants, we can see how Black female athletes are constructed as the *other*, “based on interlocking oppressions which have

transcended space, time, and history (Francique-Carter & Richardson, 2015, p. 64). These race and gender expectations specifically imposed on Black women expect them to accede to White and gendered expectations because, in order to be valued and included in spaces, they are expected to be deferent, apologetically obedient, and grateful (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Collins, 2000; Harris, 1993), even if their inclusion is superficial and tokenistic.

These experiences also raise broader questions about the role of respectability politics in shaping Black experiences, which expect Black people to be deferent to dominant norms (F. C. Harris, 2014; P. J. Harris, 2003). In effect, the cost of divergence from dominant norms is almost always differential treatment and/or exclusion. While inclusion can and does occur, it tends to come at the price of tokenistic inclusion, which bestows upon the individual the additional weight and responsibility of grappling with the discomfort of others of their presence in the space, thus resulting in limited opportunities for advancement, hostile environments, and their fighting to be the exception to the Black rule (see Carrington, 2010a). As one participant described, these experiences made them feel like they always had to be “on their best behavior.”

Therefore, these experiences with style of play and marginalization reflect the ways in which race operates in multiple spaces. Differential treatment through disadvantage and exclusion makes the racialized person aware of their positionality and distance from dominant standards—in this case, race and gender standards of play. In these ways, the participants come to understand how their ways of knowing, emoting, competing, and simply being are incompatible with dominant epistemologies and ontologies. This realization then raises questions about how to respond. Does one conform, crafting a disposition that is more in line with that of the dominant group and try to be an exception, rather than the otherized *beast*? To what extent?

As evidenced by Williams’ example and that of this study’s participants, divergence frequently leads to continued marginalization (see also Carrington, 2010a; Walton & Butryn, 2006).

As DiAngelo (2011) states, when Black bodies begin to dominate traditionally White spaces, such as a team with mostly White players and coaches, it can invoke a White fragility, or “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves . . . [including] an outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (p. 57). In the participants’ experiences, their taking up space often resulted in exclusion or hyper-penalization. Therefore, with this awareness, Black people can often feel forced to find ways to negotiate their identities, norms, and dispositions in ways that balance the risk of further and sustained marginalization and exclusion with the prospect of thriving and capitalizing on opportunities. With this in mind, I posit that U.S. basketball could be more appealing to Black youth (and especially Canadians), partly because, due to Black dominance in the sport, there appears to be more space to play in less restrictive ways. As discussed at length in Chapter 6, the American playing context may seem like a space where Black players can more readily be recognized and rewarded for their skills because their athletic capital has a better rate of exchange.

Thirdly, in making sense of these experiences with race, gender, and style of play, the participants revealed yet another layer of complexity to the aspirational and navigational capital they possessed. The athletes had to navigate these gender and racial understandings of their positionality within the Canadian basketball landscape due to the perceptions about their style of play, which inadvertently informed the racial dynamics of teams to shape their team choices. Therefore, along with educational, institutional, and gender barriers within athletic spaces, the athletes also grappled with racial barriers regarding style of play, which intersected with multiple axes of oppression, which constrained their athletic expression and threatened to limit possibilities. The athletes in this study simply wanted to use their athletic potential to play to the best of their abilities and be recognized for their skill; however, as discussed in previous chapters, race and

gender play a fundamental role in diminishing the transferability of their athletic capital. In this way, sport did not deracialize or equalize, but instead amplified existing class, gender, and racial understandings that collectively reinforced the myth that Black people are creatures of the body and not of the mind (Carrington, 2010a, p.174). Based on this, I contend that these findings further complicate our understanding of Black female athletes' aspirational and navigational capital, as they demonstrate the extent of the resilience required to stay committed to their scholarship goals while combatting these complex race and gender barriers.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The primary research question explored in this study was: How do Black Canadian female basketball athletes from the Greater Toronto Area navigate athletic, educational, and social environments in their pursuit of U.S. athletic scholarship opportunities? My sub-questions included: How do race, gender, and class shape their athletic experiences and aspirations? And how do these aspirations and challenges inform their educational trajectories? Upon investigation, I found that Black Canadian female basketball athletes from the GTA navigated athletic, educational, and social environments primarily through carefully crafted informal networks of support that included their parents, peers, and coaches.

Through early experiences with sport and influences from family, peers, coaches, and the media, many of the athletes developed a love for basketball and learned about the possibilities of U.S. athletic scholarships. As they tirelessly worked on to play on multiple teams to get the attention of American university coaches, the participants often had to contend with race, gender, and class barriers, which created challenges regarding style of play, differential treatment, the confines of female gender constructs, body issues pertaining to muscularity and strength, sexism, anti-Black racism, and access and inclusion barriers to formal and informal spaces. Despite these challenges, all the athletes interviewed in this study successfully obtained U.S. athletic scholarships and undergraduate (and sometimes) graduate degrees. Many also did so with strong academic achievement evidenced by numerous academic awards and distinctions and were exposed to numerous academic options such as HBCUs and Ivy League institutions that were unavailable to them in Canada.

However, while these U.S. athletic scholarships can help Black students navigate inequitable schooling structures (James, 2003a, 2005, 2016), in order to obtain them to complete university and potentially capitalize on professional opportunities, the participants also had to wade through

numerous educational circumstances and a dizzying number of social, educational, and athletic systems within Canada and America in order to thrive athletically, academically, and socially. I posit that the numerous barriers faced by the participants throughout this journey made them realistic about their athletic endeavours because of a keen awareness of how race and gender shaped their experiences and how women's sport tends to be ghettoized, providing less opportunities and formal support structures to female Black athletes. For these reasons, while professional play was a goal for some, many wanted to use basketball as vehicle to gain access to opportunities for university, challenge themselves, avoid student loan debt, help their parents, and simply put themselves in spaces that they felt would give them a better chance to excel. In these ways, for the athletes interviewed in this study, being a Black female baller from the GTA pursuing a U.S. athletic scholarship was also just as much about seeking meaningful experiences and opportunities and having choice over one's futures.

This study also revealed that, despite the athletes' demonstrating high levels of talent, ability, determination, and a strong work ethic throughout their journeys and, accordingly, an abundance of cultural and social capital, they faced challenges in cashing it in. This bolsters the argument frequently made in the scholarly literature that meritocracy is a myth, particularly for the marginalized and racialized. These challenges are rooted in the realities of how race operates and rely on historical scripts to create and perpetuate environments contingent on deficit thinking about Blackness. Therefore, we must question why many of the narratives about Black youth, sport, and education focus on discussing how Black students lack—capital, finances, support, grades, or standardized test scores, and so forth. This “deficit” approach often fails to recognize that Black students may actually have many of the skills, aspirations, and abilities needed to be successful, yet, given how race operates, their capital, ways of knowing, ways of being, and cultural reference points are often unintelligible to the dominant group or, as argued throughout this study, have a poor

“exchange rate,” which limits and restricts their access to successful trajectories. If not already worn down by their awareness of this poor exchange rate, Black youth often have the additional burden of having to find ways to circumvent these limitations and barriers to future possibilities by crafting divergent—and undeniably arduous—pathways, which also reflects just how determined they are to reach their goals and resist barriers to education, sport, and upwards socioeconomic mobility. In every way, these youth have to be exceptional to make it and have to push to be anomalous, which Carrington (2010a) argues is a constraining option required of Black people in order to access success.

However, while Black students like the ones interviewed in this study are able to find success through these divergent pathways, we must also pay attention to the lack of protection, guidance, risk, sacrifice, and, therefore, precarity that these youth must endure. In addition, the need to craft this complex divergent pathway of *hoop dreams* and its popularity also speak to the extent and normalization of their systemic exclusion. Therefore, the findings in this study also demonstrate how formal schooling systems continue to be alienating to Black students, obfuscating these students’ reaching of their full potential and full awareness of their academic options, *even* when they are high-achieving and highly visible in their educational contexts. This finding adds particular depth and complexity to Black student research in the GTA, which predominantly centers on Black male students and their educational experiences including disproportionate discipline, achievement, and opportunity gaps. Through examining the specific experiences of Black female students, we come to learn that, even when Black students have the “right stuff” —including supportive families with high expectations, social capital, good grades, high aspirations—there still is nowhere for them to go within formal educational systems in Ontario/Canada to develop, nurture, and use those skills. As a result, this lack of space ends up pushing many such students deeper into sport—and potentially out of the country.

Therefore, while many continue to believe that sport is a neutral equalizing force and often use it as a medium to attract disengaged and marginalized Black youth, I argue that, while sport can be beneficial and provide ways to circumvent race, gender, or class oppression, the findings in this study demonstrate that it also amplifies and reproduces existing inequalities, failing to address the structural nature of systems of exclusion and inclusion based on race, gender, and/or class. As Joseph, Darnell, and Nakamura (2012a) argue, “sport[ing] cultures [are] sites where race, racism, and racial hierarchies are constructed and maintained, yet simultaneously obscured and normalized” (p. 2). Therefore, an overreliance on and normalization of this divergent pathway can act to further marginalize Black youth because, as Wells (2012) argues, these athletic pathways have very limited possibilities for success, especially for Black and/or female athletes and, as evidenced by this study, also expose them to many risks and disadvantages.

Hence, I assert that it is imperative to recognize and address how historical racial scripts within our educational, social, cultural, and political systems continue to shape the barriers faced by Black youth to truncate the possibilities for their Black lives. It is also essential to understand how these historical racial scripts affect Black lives in intersectional ways (with other axes of oppression such as gender, class, and sexuality); indeed, more nuanced analyses in this area can provide a more fulsome understanding of how race operates to impede the ambitions of Black Canadian youth in Ontario. Questions that remain to be addressed include: Who gets constructed as having athletic talent and ability and why? Who gets constructed as having intellectual talent and ability and why? How do beliefs about future possibilities shape how Black youth experience their schooling and beliefs about their future possibilities? Where do Black people with talents and high achievement and potential go to have them affirmed, nurtured, and supported? How are Black students subversively dissuaded or encouraged to pursue certain pathways over others? How are the

experiences of Black female students distinct from those of their Black male and non-Black female counterparts?

Theoretical Contributions of the Study

My research complicates discourses of Black youth, sport, and higher education through its gendered and intersectional reading of athletic scholarship aspirations from a Canadian and Caribbean and African diasporic perspective. Moreover, it incorporates Black Canadian voices in discourses around Black women's perspectives as racialized and gendered youth, women, athletes, and students. While further study is required, this research already begins to ascertain a relationship between Black Canadian women and the influence of African-American popular culture in shaping their identities, experiences, frames of reference, and how they resist structural barriers.

In addition, though the use of counternarratives, this study uses a piece-by-piece, stage-by-stage, decision-by-decision unpacking of how this phenomenon played out in the lives of the participants during childhood and adolescence. This approach elucidates the minutiae of how structural racism works within educational structures, sporting cultures, media, and intimate personal relationships (peers, coaches, family) to reify ideas about life possibilities, traditional pathways, and the (in)visibility of particular societal roles. Together, these factors jointly shape the experiences, outcomes, and decision-making processes of racialized youth and the parameters of their habitus. In addition, this method unsettles the *genesis amnesia* that shapes the reproduction of social strata by making clear the origins, subtleties, and mechanics of oppressive social structures. In so doing, this research also thinks through and locates Black Canadian women's understandings of racial identity, racism, racialization, gender, gender performance, and athletic identities to trouble myths of meritocracy within the Canadian multicultural context, which is frequently constructed as one of the most socially progressive and inclusive socio-political contexts in the world.

Furthermore, this research also locates race and gender oppression within Bourdieusian frameworks and discourses around human capital to elucidate the ways in which the kinds of capital often embodied by Black youth are devalued or have a poor exchange rate, thus eliciting the need for the creation of divergent pathways to socioeconomic mobility, such as immigration to the United States. In so doing, this analysis explicates how racialization impacts the appraised value and rate of exchange of capital possessed by Black people, including Black women. In addition, through the use of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to highlight the forms of capital embodied by the participants, this research interrogates how class is not only shaped by economic capital, but can also be modulated by other social, cultural, and ideological factors.

In these ways, my research intervenes in the scholarly research to not only locate and analyze the specific experiences of the marginalization of Black Canadian female youth in sport and education, but also to grapple with the intra-diasporic movements of Black people between the United States and Canada. In so doing, this research also seeks to unpack the specific ways that Black women in particular, experience, navigate, and resist structural barriers and exercise agency.

Areas for Further Study

The findings in this study explicate the need for further research in several areas to help clarify, enrich, and broaden extant scholarship on the experiences of Black youth in Canada, who are socially positioned in different ways due to their race, gender, class, and other layers of social identities, which complicates their experiences, trajectories, and outcomes. Here are some of the suggested areas for further research:

- 1) How do Black athletic scholarship recipients grapple with athletic injuries? How does it affect their educational and academic outcomes and trajectories?
- 2) How do Black female athletes transition out of their role as players after completing their collegiate playing careers? Do they end up in athletic administration or in coaching positions?

Do they play professionally or leave sport altogether? Which factors shape and support these athletic transitions?

- 3) Academic and athletic scholarships tend to be promoted as a way to provide financial support to Black students pursuing post-secondary education. However, while these scholarships may make it easier for Black students to fund their access to universities, eligibility requirements can be demanding and as evidenced by this study, may not necessarily provide wrap-around support to ensure the success of Black students. How can scholarship interventions be made more effective in serving Black youth?
- 4) This study made clear the need for both quantitative and qualitative research that would capture the diverse experiences of Black women and girls within the Canadian context and, more specifically, the GTA context. What are the specific intersectional barriers they face? What does Black girlhood look like for Black female youth in this context? How do they fare in the workplace? How do they fare academically as compared to other students? What are their educational outcomes and trajectories? How do they experience and navigate other social structures and institutions?
- 5) Generally speaking, what are the experiences of Black GTA youth in post-secondary education? How do they fare in comparison to other groups? Which areas of study do they opt for? What are the specific barriers they face? What are their outcomes? What role does the sense of belonging play in shaping the educational and social experiences of Black youth in higher education, or in elementary and secondary school?
- 6) While this study focused on athletes pursuing educational and athletic opportunities in the United States, what are the experiences of Black Canadian youth pursuing strictly academic opportunities at American universities at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels? What were their motivations for emigrating? How do they fare, and what barriers did they face?

- 7) Many of the athletes interviewed in this study were academically strong and ambitious students but lacked access to supports that would fully nurture their intellectual potential. How do Black GTA students' access and experience learning enrichment opportunities like AP, IB, Gifted, the Arts, and so on? How do they fare socially? Which specific barriers do they face as high-ability students?

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Appendix A – Glossary

Black: within the context of this study refers to the socially constructed and hybrid identities of those belonging to the African diaspora, which includes, but is not limited to people of African descent in the Americas, Europe, the Caribbean and Africa (Fanon, 2008; Gilroy, 1993; Smedley, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). People categorized as Black are often distinguished from [racial] others by their tightly curly and sometimes kinky hair, darker skin tone and rounder, less aquiline features (Fanon, 2008; Gilroy, 1993; Smedley, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Controlling images: refer to the archetypes or stereotypes outlined for Black women that are historically constructed and meant to oppress and limit their agency self-presentation (Collins, 2000).

Cultural capital: refers to the non-financial elements such as: education, knowledge and social skills, including the awareness and ability to comfortably navigate within the dominant ideology (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 47–48). It is passively acquired through kinship networks, attitudes, and creates a sense of normal or common sense.

Division I, II and III: are divisions which segment the athletic programs of post-secondary institutions (in descending order–Division I is more competitive than Division II and so on) in the NCAA by numerous factors including the size of their budget and student bodies, number and size of their scholarships and the level of competition and intensity of play (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Division I schools in the NCAA are the most visible and have the largest athletic budgets and therefore, the most athletic scholarships (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018). Division II and III schools have smaller budgets and therefore, offer less in terms of athletic scholarships and are also less athletically competitive.

Economic capital: refers to the most liquid form of capital and is intrinsically linked to money and property rights (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 46–47) and by extension social power.

Greater Toronto Area (GTA): refers to a megalopolis in Ontario, Canada that is comprised of the city of Toronto and its surrounding regions which include Halton, Peel, York, and Durham. Together, they create the most populous area in Canada (OECD, 2010). The GTA is also informally segregated into ethnic enclaves (Hou & Picot, 2003; Hulchanski, 2010).

Race: within the context of this study, refers to a social construct in which people with similar phenotypical features are categorized as a biological and socio-political category. Race, although socially constructed, has real social, political, psychological and economic implications due to the ways in which various racial groups are socially ranked as more privileged or disadvantaged than [racial] others through the discriminatory practices of racism (Amin, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gilroy, 1993; Harrison, Reynolds-Dobbs, & Thomas, 2008; Smedley, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Social capital: refers to informal networks of support and influence that privilege some and exclude others. These networks require time and effort to develop and are easier to develop for those with high levels of economic and other forms of capital, which allows for the time and skills to build these relationships (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 52).

Traditional femininity: in this research refers to gender expectations rooted in Victorian ideals, which mark peak femininity such as women that are gentle, submissive, passive, and modest, presenting themselves in ways that are shaped by patriarchal gender norms (Gorham, 2012; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003)

Trash talk: refers to a practice within competitive sport where athletes engage in a playful insult-talk. Some argue that this trash talk, specifically in regard to Black players is an extension of African-American traditions of “playing the dozens”, where individuals engage in playful insulting banter, which is an improvisational exercise in wit, wordplay, and performance (Chimezie, 1976; Davidson, 1998; Eveslage & Delaney, 1998; Lefever, 1981; Spears, 2001). Chimezie (1976) argues that this practice likely originates from Western African practices in Ghanaian and Igbo (Nigerian) communities, where it is called *Ikocha Nkocha*. This practice was likely maintained by the diaspora throughout the Transatlantic Slave Trade, explaining its widespread, generational, diasporic, and contemporary practice.

Whiteness: within the context of this study refers to those who are socially constructed as belonging to the European diaspora. People categorized as White are often distinguished from [racial] others by their silky, straighter hair, aquiline features and fair skin (Harris, 1993; Rohrleitner & Ryan, 2013, p. 44). Whiteness is often perceived in the Western world as the basis of most social norms and institutions, is an extension of Eurocentrism, and can often be a social and ideologically privileged

identity (Amin, 1989; DiAngelo, 2011; Harris, 1993; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Lund & Carr, 2015; Mahoney, Martha R., 1997; Warren, 2001, 2003; Wildman, 1996).

Appendix B - Introductory Questionnaire

Research Information

Thank you for participating in this research. Your feedback is important. This research project explores the experiences of Black Canadian female athletes that have received U.S. athletic scholarships. This survey is to garner preliminary information about the participants in preparation for the individual interview. Upon submission of the survey, you will be contacted to schedule an individual interview.

All information shared will be kept strictly confidential. Data gathered from the survey will not be shared with anyone beyond the principal investigator and your identity will be kept confidential. You have the right to withdraw at any time and any data gathered from you will be destroyed. Upon completion of individual interview, each participant will receive a \$20 gift card of their choosing. If you have any questions at any time, please feel free to contact me at: RC.George@live.com.

I consent to participate in the Black Canadian Female Athletes and NCAA Athletic Scholarships' survey conducted by R.C. George. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. Typing my name below indicates my consent. Please enter your full name (this will be kept confidential):

Name:

Date:

Please enter your e-mail address and phone number (this will be kept confidential):

1) What is your age group?

- a) 20 to 24
- b) 25 to 29
- c) 30 to 34
- d) 35 to 40

2) Please describe your race/ethnicity?

3) Did you attend secondary school in Ontario?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Other (please specify)

4) Did you receive an NCAA athletic scholarship to an American college or university?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Other (please specify)

- 5) How many years did you play at an American institution?**
- a) 1 year
 - b) 2 years
 - c) 3 years
 - d) 4 years
 - e) 5 years
 - f) Other (please specify)
- 6) Did you complete your degree?**
- a) Yes, at the institution that I received the scholarship from.
 - b) Yes, but at another institution in the U.S.
 - c) Yes, but at another institution in Canada.
 - d) No
 - e) Other (please specify)
- 7) Where do you currently reside?**
- a) United States
 - b) Canada
 - c) Other
 - d) Other (please specify)
- 8) Gift card selection:**
- a) Simon's
 - b) Starbucks
 - c) Zara
 - d) H&M

Seeking Black Female U.S. Athletic Scholarship Recipients from the GTA

Need: Participants for an approximately one hour interview.

Criteria: Black Canadian female basketball athletes from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) that have successfully obtained U.S. athletic scholarships.

Purpose: This study aims to explore the social, academic and athletic experiences of Black Canadian U.S. athletic scholarship recipients and supports a doctoral dissertation in Sociology at York University in Toronto, ON.

Conducted by: Rhonda George, PhD Candidate, with Dr. Carl James, Sociologist and Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora serving as research project supervisor.

Compensation: Participants will receive a **\$20** gift card of their choosing (Simons, Zara, H&M, Starbucks) as a token of appreciation for their participation.



To participate, please contact Rhonda at: