

“Rags to Riches” The Upward Mobility of Black Athletes

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Abstract

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My thesis is attempting to answer one main question, “do Black college football athletes view the National Football League as a way to achieve upward mobility?” Throughout the history of sports “rags to riches” has been a glorified narrative. Often the media highlights young Black athletes from lower socio-economic statuses whose dreams of playing in the NFL has come true. In college the athlete excelled on the field, became a draft pick, and is viewed as a success story. The professional athlete is then showcased on ESPN’s “30 for 30” in a multi-million dollar home celebrating the “rags to riches” myth.

In order to answer the central question, it is important to understand the history of Black athletes in sports. Today it is hard to imagine a time when Blacks were not allowed to play on college or professional football teams. Black men have struggled to be acknowledged for their gifts on and off the field. Black athletes finally have the opportunity to thrive on large platforms and it is important to celebrate the African American success. However, overtime sports have seemingly captivated the African American community. Sports have become the golden ticket or the pathway to success for some young Black athletes. Sports are viewed as an opportunity to achieve success and an alternative avenue to provide for their family. This dream is fueling the idea behind my thesis.

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Table of Contents

Contents.....	Page
Introduction.....	5
Background/Literature Review.....	11
“Rags to Riches”.....	35
Upward Mobility.....	51
Analysis.....	67
Conclusion.....	70

Hallahan's (1999) literature review of framing identifies how seven models of framing could be applied to public relations. One of these models was framing of news. Hallahan pointed out how this perspective fit certain organized categories of content to resonate with a particular culture. Since the publication of Hallahan's work, digital media has expanded traditional public relations efforts. The purpose of this research is to apply this framing theory to examine the media's spin techniques of the "Rags to Riches" myth of Black athletes in professional football. Robert Entman (1993) explained, "Whatever its specific use, the concept of framing offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text. Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human conscious is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location—such as speech, utterance, news report, or novel—to that consciousness." (p. 51) In addition, a rhetorical analysis focuses on how young Black boys process these messages, examine the information, make judgments, and draw inferences on how to achieve upward mobility.

The first step in my thesis process was to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Texas at Austin. Approval from IRB is required for any project that desires to interview a select group of participants for their data. IRB requires authors to submit the potential interview questions, the specific criteria for the interviewees, and a list of potential questions. After speaking with a member from the IRB board, we decided it would be better to apply for an exemption and once approved I was able to start my interviews. The

questions asked in the interviews will be listed in the appendix. The research began by reading *Sports and Freedom* by Ronald A. Smith and *Sport and the American Dream* by Howard L. Nixon II, Ph.D. Professional football players from The University of Texas at Austin were selected as subjects of research and analysis, as well as current UT football players with varying socio-economic backgrounds. The time period delegated for in person interviews was February 1, 2020 to March 13, 2020. A total of six in person interviews were scheduled, however only three subject interviews were conducted due availability and implications imposed by the COVID19 pandemic. The study was then converted to textual analysis of sports media commentary, player statements, online articles, opinion pieces, podcasts, social media posts, and blogs. The focus included Division I college football as a specific pathway to mobility for high school and college football players regarding the rags to riches mythology. Most of the supporting content was focused on African Americans or people of color.

The rags to riches myth has captivated Americans for centuries. “Rags to riches” is most commonly used to describe a person who begins their life in poverty and eventually climbs the economic ladder. That climb is made possible through various institutions, perhaps most visibly through sports. As Nixon (1984) asserts, “Sport seems an ideal vehicle for understanding the pursuit of the American Dream both because achievement and success are so openly and explicitly emphasized in sport, and because the rags to riches story so often seems to be told by the contemporary mass media with sports figures as the main characters” (p. 10). In the Black community, sports such as football, basketball, and track are extracurricular activities that allow positive engagement and avoidance of trouble while parents are working. Sports are also viewed as a “ticket” out of the Black community if options are limited after high school. Playing sports

may compensate for the lack of financial resources required for tutoring and preparation for standardized college admissions tests. “A large segment of students gain access to high-quality education despite school reform efforts, increased standardization in schools, the influx of charter schools, commitment to high-stakes testing, and increased school district oversight by states and corporations (ASHE Higher Education Report 2014, pg.27). So it can be inferred, the probability of a college education can be greatly improved by athletic scholarships.

In the documentary “*Warriors of Liberty City*”, viewers watch young Black boys from a low-income neighborhood play football. The young boys and their families share their experiences, hardships, and setbacks. Black seven-year-old boys share stories of losing their best friend and teammate to a drive-by shooting. The film also shares the triumphs of turning a horrible tragedy into an inspirational motivation for the upcoming season. Although these boys are still in elementary school, football means everything to them. These boys and their families recognize that football can be a path to success. Once again, the financial expectations of football are set at a young age ensuing undeniable pressure. As the journey continues to high school, the pressure builds and family hardships increase. For athletes that reach the college level of their sport, the dream of success is even closer to reality.

There are many ways to climb the economic ladder, but for a young boy in an underserved community, there tends to be a popular aspiration: the National Football League (NFL). The NFL is a lifelong dream that can captivate the hearts of many young boys. Visit any football field across America and ask young boys about their future and dreams, a common response would be to become a professional football player. “What are these childhood dreams? For male respondents, becoming a professional athlete topped the list” (Kocher, 2019 para. 6). It

is a goal that some football players are willing to dedicate their entire life toward achieving. Countless hours are exerted outside of practice to perfect their craft. Films are watched from the greats that came before them to model their game to their likeness. The work ethic and determination to reach the professional status is inspiring. Tunnel vision has been a phrase used to describe an athlete that has plans to play at the next level. Tunnel vision suggests that all of their attention, effort, and talent is toward one goal: the NFL. Even once an athlete is in the NFL, this mindset does not stop. Philadelphia Eagles player Jordan Mailata states in an interview:

“I will not, I will not. I’ll be focusing solely on my game plan and what we’ve been practicing that week, game-plan-wise. So I remember when I first got activated for a game, I’ve never been more focused in mind. So I’ll definitely be focused on what we’re planning to do and sticking to that game plan. The mentality to play this sport and the physicality to play this sport are married together, and it takes a different kind of beast to play the O-line, man” (Fierro, 2019 para. 4).

For some athletes, there is no back up plan, because football is the *only* plan. If success is not immediate, then there is a continuation to work until that one opportunity longed for since childhood is received. Some young men are willing to move across the country to train for the NFL Scouting Combine, get drafted to a team in a city with no family or friends, just to play in the NFL. NFL hopeful Damon Sheehy-Guiseppi was homeless in Miami, Florida when he was preparing for a tryout with the Cleveland Browns (Shook, 2019). Sheehy-Guiseppi was in Arizona when he learned about a workout in Miami that could help him earn a tryout with the Browns and travelled across the country without hesitation. Sheehy-Guiseppi was not formally invited to the workout and knew there was a risk he might not be able to participate. In an

interview Sheehy-Guiseppi said, “I was like 'just give me the address and I'll talk to them myself. So I show up and the guy says something to me. He was like 'who are you” (Shook, 2019 para. 9)? Sheehy-Guiseppi talked his way into the tryout and impressed the coaches by running the 40-yard dash in 4.38 seconds (Shook, 2019). Afterwards, the coach officially offered Guiseppi a tryout with the Browns two weeks later. He impressed the scouts so much the Browns offered him a contract. “I couldn't be more happy,” he said. “It's a grind, you know what I'm saying? I wasn't mad that I was sleeping on the beach. I wasn't upset, I was happy, because I got an opportunity and that's all I wanted. ... I was blessed for that. I was more happy about that. I wasn't even thinking about where I was sleeping, I was thinking about the opportunity that I had in my hands right now and I just wanted to make the most of it” (Shook, 2019 para. 37). Sheehy-Guiseppi's situation was not viewed as a sacrifice, but as a necessary means to an end. Sheehy-Guiseppi's journey is a feel-good story, and it would appear to confirm the virtues of the rags-to-riches myth. However, his experience is so clearly not representative, and media celebrations of his determination may reinforce unrealistic expectations of how one might climb the athletic ladder.

As amazing as these goals can be, it is important to consider the reality of these dreams. Parents instill lessons that stay forever etched in the mind of a football player. Parents offer encouragement and say that they can achieve anything they put their mind to. The only requirement is to believe, work hard, and earn the reward. Although this mantra is inspiring, it is not attainable in every situation.

This dream is more prevalent in the Black community, particularly in low socioeconomic areas. Former New England Patriot Martellus Bennet said, “We were black boys. And to be born

a black boy is to be born into athletics. Black fathers are often disappointed if their sons aren't good at sports. Not excelling at sports as a black boy meant not being cool — even weirder, it meant not really being black. When you're growing up as a black boy, it feels like the world tosses you a ball and says, Good luck. Go get 'em, Champ” (Bennet, 2019 para. 6). Like Bennet, many young black boys feel pressure from their fathers to excel at sports. This outside pressure adds to the “rags to riches” narrative and sets high expectations for young black boys at a young age.

Black athletes are blessed to attend world-renowned universities on a full scholarship, which becomes a stepping stone to resources and a quality education. Once the prospective coursework is completed, the opportunity presents itself to graduate and find a job like other traditional students. However, the traditional graduation path is usually bypassed by college athletes. Most collegiate football players envision leaving college after their third year of school to enter the NFL Draft or graduate early in December to train before the NFL Scouting Combine. The focus is not to receive a quality education to find a traditional job, but to perfect their craft to become a quality athlete in order to receive a job as a professional football player. Goal setting for student-athletes shapes both their academic and athletic identity (Lescroart, 2018).

A career in the NFL is the goal. The job has been idolized and I believe has been deemed the dream job for many young Black athletes. Although not all of the athletes are receiving millions of dollars contractually, players are compensated relatively well. If an athlete can make the cut and solidify a position on the team, then dreams become a reality. This profession can provide a comfortable style of living for the athlete and the extended family, whose hope is for

the next generation to do better financially than the previous generation and acquire upward mobility.

In consideration of the Black community, there seems to be an emphasis on the NFL as the method for upward mobility for Black athletes in the sport. The reasons vary, depending on the situation, but many outside factors play a role in a young Black man pursuing the NFL. I will use the textual analysis of scholarly literature, player interviews, podcasts, and other content which describes or alludes to the rags to riches myth in some form. Posts on social media will be utilized to understand how the myth is viewed and how it controls the narrative in the modern world will also be referenced. First it is important to understand the role of NCAA College Football, football history, media influence, and the impacts education and career longevity have in advancing the rags to riches myth along with upward mobility in the Black community.

BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW

Media's Role in the History of The National Collegiate Athletic Association Football

Media framing is embedded in the United States culture and influences our thoughts and actions. Frames not only separate but also unite issues and events, and impact how the receiver thinks about an issue in a prearranged way. Media frames cautiously reveal numerous latent assumptions about society that are embedded within dominant cultural perspectives. They are located in communicator's minds, the texts, the receivers' minds, and the larger culture (Entman 1993). Identifying media history is useful and important in understanding significant social biases. The sports arena is one segment of society where race and racism continue to be pronounced and relatively obvious.

In 1869, Rutgers University and the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University played in the first college football game (Parlier, 2020). The rules were adapted from the London Football Association and the game was played similarly to rugby. Players could not pick up or throw the ball, which seems like a foreign concept when considering the context in which football is played today. There were 25 players on the field for each team and, with no more than 100 spectators, Rutgers University took home the victory (Parlier 2020). Seven years later representatives came together to form their own rules for the game.

On November 23, 1876, men from Princeton, Yale, Colombia, and Harvard created the rules for the football game known today and the Intercollegiate Football Association was formed. The first goal of the Thanksgiving Day Game was kicked by Walter Camp, who a decade later became known as the “father of American football.” Camp is credited for designing the line of scrimmage, guidelines for how quarterbacks should snap the ball, offensive downs, and he declared that only 11 people should be on the field at a given time. These rules are still used in the modern game. (Smith, 1988, p. 77)

Although newspapers covered college football from the outset, media exposure grew significantly after the first radio broadcast of a game. The October 8, 1921 rivalry game between West Virginia University and Pittsburgh University was the first game broadcast over the airwaves (Parlier, 2020). Another major media accomplishment in college football was the first game televised. On September 30, 1939 the season opener between Fordham University and Waynesburg was televised with approximately 5,000 viewers (Parlier, 2020). The game was broadcasted by The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Fordham won the game, 34-7 (Parlier, 2020). This once again changed how fans could experience the game and altered college

football forever. Today, radio and television media allow players to acquire name recognition for the purpose of recruiting and pursuing the rags to riches myth. However, racial disparities also are present in sports coverage. Although blacks are no longer underrepresented, Grainger, Newman, and Andrews advise that increases in the quantity of coverage of blacks in sports are not to be taken as an indication of equity (Andrews, Grainger, Newman, 2006). Rather, bias can be seen in the manner in which blacks are characterized: often as poor, criminal, and sexually promiscuous. Furthermore, race-based differences are apparent in the linguistic cues offered by sports reporters, with black athletes addressed in terms of their physicality, brute strength, and natural ability, and whites discussed in relation to their intelligence, ability to read plays, and strong work ethic (Billings, Eastman, 2004).

Before 1963 referees could only rely on live action and the teams trusted that officials were making the correct call. On December 7, 1963 this was no longer an issue. A 1,300 pound machine was used to show a touchdown again during the Army versus Navy game (Parlier, 2020). The announcer had to explain that the Army did not suddenly score again, but that it was a replay of the touchdown just scored. Today instant replay is relied on heavily. Although officials do a great job officiating games, the expectation to oversee all activity on the field is daunting. Occasionally, a replay is required to ensure that the correct call was enforced and the calls are not one-sided. Instant replays have allowed for a more precise and fair game.

In 1998 bowl games were created that allowed the top ten ranked teams to be matched up to play against each other at the end of the season. This was known as the Bowl Championship Series. (BCS) The teams ranked number 1 and 2 went on to play in the BCS National Championship game and the first game was between Tennessee and Florida. Tennessee won the

game 23-16 (Parlier, 2020). The College Football Playoff (CFP) ranked teams from 1-25 each week and after the final week of the season, picked the top four teams. The second ranked team plays the fourth ranked team and the third ranked team plays the first ranked team. The winner of each game will proceed to play in the CFP final to determine the champion for the season.

The first CFP National Championship game was between The Ohio State University and Oregon in 2014 (Parlier, 2020). Ohio State won the game 42-20. This once again changed how college football was seen and provided teams an extra goal to work toward during the season. The first ranking of college football teams took place in 1936 by the First Associated Press. College football rankings are extremely important and can influence a team's clout on and off the field. Minnesota was ranked number one and went on to become the football champions of 1936 (Parlier, 2020).

The NCAA Football history does not include many Black athletes. Segregation in the United States also meant segregation in sports. Although integration happened eventually, it took some universities longer than others. According to Richard Lapchick, universities north of the Mason-Dixon line integrated their sports team much earlier than universities in the south. Lapchick reached out to universities for information regarding the first Black football players at their schools and few schools had information to provide.

However, from 1891 to 1894 George Flippin attended The University of Nebraska and was the university's first Black student-athlete (Lapchick, 2008). George Flippin played baseball, threw shot put, and played football for the university and later went on to become a doctor. Harvard reported that a Black football player named William Henry Lewis played for the university in 1892 while attending law school (Lapchick, 2008). Lewis was also an

All-American athlete. Preston Eagles played football at Indiana University in the 1890s and was the first African American to receive an advanced degree from the university. Tackle Gideon helped lead Michigan Agricultural College, now known as Michigan State to an undefeated season in 1913 (Lapchick, 2008). The first Black Heisman winner was Ernest Davis in 1961 from Syracuse University (Lapchick, 2008).

Although Black athletes were given the opportunity to play football in the early 1900s in the north, it was not the same in the south. The south has a deep-rooted history of racism and segregation. In 1865 laws known as The Black Codes were passed in the south. (Foner 2015) These laws determined where Black families could live and work. Although slavery was abolished at this time, the Black Codes ensured Black men could serve as inexpensive labor for white families. The south went further by creating Jim Crow laws which segregated schools, neighborhoods, public restrooms, and more. In 1896 Plessy V. Ferguson declared segregation constitutional with the intent of things being, “separate but equal” (Hoffer, 2014). Segregation sparked “The great migration” from 1916 to 1970 when six million African Americans left the south (Black, 2015). Given what we know about the history of The United States of America and the south, it is not surprising that universities in the south were slower to integrate.

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional, but in 1957 federal troops were sent to Little Rock, Arkansas to ensure the safety of nine Black students entering a predominantly white high school (Kirk, 2011). It is not surprising that the Southeastern Conference (SEC) was the last conference to integrate their football teams in 1956 (Lapchick, 2008). Louisiana passed a law banning interracial sports, but this law was overturned in 1959 by the Supreme Court (Lapchick, 2008). Mississippi legislators

threatened to stop providing funding for schools that competed against integrated teams, which speaks to the racist beliefs and mindsets during that time.

Unfortunately, The University of Texas at Austin was no different than other southern universities. The first Black letterman player at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) was Julius Whittier. He made his first debut in 1970 (Vertuno, 2018). Although other Black football players attended UT before him, most were not successful at the university. The ban on Black players was dropped in 1963 at UT, but none of the Black student-athletes made it long enough to play on the varsity team until Whittier. At that time freshmen were not allowed to play under NCAA rules, which meant athletes could not start playing until their sophomore year (Vertuno, 2018).

Julius Whittier was from San Antonio, Texas and his parents were extremely concerned for his safety when he enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin. Whittier explained in an interview that the coaches treated him well, but some of the players had issues with him. “Texas seems to recruit a lot of boys from small towns, and most of them have small minds just like their fathers,” he said (Vertuno, 2018, para. 8). “They never think about the things that are happening in this country. You never hear them talk about Vietnam or racism. If you want to know the truth, the only people I’ve met that I can really talk to are the longhairs or hippies. They are really concerned about things like ecology and the war. I’m concerned about those things, too” (Vertuno, 2018 para. 8).

Although Julius Whittier had to face several challenges and hardships during his time at UT, he was still extremely successful. During the time that Whittier played at Texas, the Longhorns won 28-5 and 20-1 in the Southwestern Conference (Vertuno, 2018). Julius played

two seasons at guard position before switching to tight end during his senior season. That year Julius Whittier caught every touchdown pass thrown for the Longhorns, which is an incredible accomplishment. He graduated from UT with a degree in philosophy and attended law school at The University of Texas at Austin (Vertuno, 2018). Julius Whittier opened the doors for Black athletes at The University of Texas at Austin and his legacy will always be remembered for breaking a race barrier.

Tony McGee and 13 other black players, known as the Black 14, were kicked off the undefeated and nationally ranked Wyoming Cowboys football team in the midst of the 1969 season (Fletcher, 2018). Wyoming's Black players proposed to wear black armbands in a game against Brigham Young University in protest of the Mormon Church's beliefs against Blacks becoming priests, as well as acts of racial slurs and unfair tactics against Black players during the previous year's game. The Wyoming head football coach, Lloyd Eaton, did not support this idea and berated and insulted the Black players, saying they were troublemakers, half of whom did not know their fathers (Fletcher, 2018). Then, he kicked them off the team. Tony McGee recalls Lloyd Eaton saying the players could go back home to live off "colored relief." Or, if they were lucky, maybe they could go play for Morgan, Grambling or some other historically black college or university (Fletcher, 2018, para. 4). Despite these racial tactics, McGee went on to a proven successful football career at Bishop College and launched a successful 14-year NFL career with the Chicago Bears, New England Patriots, and the Washington Redskins.

A significant event in the history of football integration occurred in 1970 when legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant invited the University of Southern California, an out of state racially integrated team to play the University of Alabama, which was one of the last schools in the

country with an all-white team (Barra, 2013). That game changed football in the south proving that integration was the future of football. Jerry Claiborne, said that the game would, “do more for integration in Alabama in sixty minutes than Martin Luther King, Jr. did in 20 years” (Barra, 2013, para. 9). The following year, the University of Alabama recruited John Mitchell and Sylvester Croom (Barra, 2013). John Mitchell was the first black player to start for Alabama and later became the first black assistant coach at the University. Sylvester Croom later returned to Alabama as an assistant coach and then the first black coach in the SEC at Mississippi State (Barra, 2013).

Recruiting

College football is an extremely lucrative and successful business, especially for Division I Teams. Because of its economic promise, college football aligns well with the rags to riches myth. In the 2013-2014 season, the top 20 teams in the United States generated around \$1.42 billion in revenue alone with the top five schools bringing in \$100 million each (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). This can place enormous pressure for the players to deliver on the field and for the coaches to recruit quality athletes. College football promotes the “rags to riches myth”, because it serves as a stepping stone to achieving financial freedom. Athletes must play at least three years of College football before they are eligible for the NFL draft, so where they spend those years is very important. Colleges across the United States desire to recruit the best players. Recruitment is vital to the longevity of a top-rated program or for a school seeking to improve their record. As players graduate or move to the next level it is imperative to have a succession plan. The absence of quality recruiting may lead to regression of the team.

It is easier for a big-time university to attract the attention of a high school senior than it is for a small school that lacks an established reputation. One reason universities spend large sums of money on practice facilities, equipment, and locker rooms is to keep pace with big name rivals and also ensure advancements are not overshadowed. A school believes they have to keep up with the competition (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). Universities long to prove they have the very best to offer student-athletes walking through their doors, therefore incentives are a big attraction.

In 2015, the NCAA created a new rule that changed the way players could be recruited. Schools were allowed to pay the Full Cost of Attendance for its players (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). Before 2015, universities could only pay for tuition, housing, and books. Now schools are allowed to provide additional aid for transportation and other expenses. These advantages could be a determining factor for a student-athlete that could not otherwise afford college expenses independently. The confidence in knowing that financial burdens are eliminated can provide comfort and security for the athlete and his family (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). This rule contributes to the “rags to riches” myth, because universities can provide athletes with the tools they need for success. Since schools can pay for the full cost of attendance for student-athletes, their main focus can be on football and their academics, giving student-athletes the opportunity to develop their skills even more.

The Cost of Attendance for a student-athlete must be equal to the Cost of Attendance for a traditional student enrolled in the same school (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). This rule maintains morale and ensures that student-athletes are not receiving special treatment. One important stipulation is that universities have the power to determine their own Cost of Attendance

(Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). The housing prices for a college located in the heart of a major city, will be much different than the housing prices for a college in a small rural town. As a result, it would be unfair for the NCAA to mandate a housing allotment to each school, because other factors must be taken into consideration.

Regardless, the extra benefits universities can offer make a tremendous difference in their recruiting and recruiting ranking. For every \$1,000 in a school's Cost of Attendance Allowance, their recruiting ranking improves between 2.07 and 4.35 available slots (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). A recruiting ranking is "the ranking of the freshman recruiting class for each school(s) by Rivals.com (2015), a well-known and widely respected public high school scouting provider" (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). The recruiting ranking is subjective, but Bradbury & Pitts analysis shows that rankings can correlate with class quality and performance (Bradbury & Pitts, 2017). The improvement in recruiting rankings confirm that outside incentives play a factor in how schools are viewed by recruits and where student-athletes choose to attend.

High School seniors that are highly ranked and recruited are also known to leave high school a semester early in order to get ahead in college; this is known as early enrollment. "Early enrolling is when high school students graduate a semester early, allowing them to enroll in college for the spring semester as opposed to the summer after graduation" (Moriarty, 2018, para. 3). High school players forego their last couple of months of high school to start working out and developing their skills. The athletes hope to be ahead of their freshmen peers upon arriving during the summer and to have an opportunity to participate in spring ball with the rest of the team. Spring football takes place during the spring semester when the college team is not in season (Moriarty, 2018). This is the time for players to showcase off-season workouts and for

the players to start earning their spots for the upcoming season. A high school senior has the opportunity to learn the plays and become well adapted to how the college game of football is played with hopes of earning a spot during their freshman season.

A study was done with seven student athletes who did early enrollment to examine if early enrolling has impacted their college experience. The study found that overall the student-athletes found at least some benefit to early enrollment (Dalgety 2012). The student-athletes thought they were able to adjust academically and they were able to adapt socially due to early enrollment. Going to college early helped them understand how college level classes work and gave them an advantage for their freshman year of college (Dalgety 2012). This study shows there can be huge benefits for student-athletes who early enroll and it is not a surprise that the number of athletes that early enroll continues to increase.

Early enrollment has become quite common in college sports today, especially for big name universities. “According to the Associated Press, all but four Power 5 teams had at least one early enrollee in 2016, an average of about four per school. There were more than 250 early enrollees in total” (Moriarty, 2018, para. 4). The opportunity for players to become accustomed to college life early can be seen as a huge advantage for most athletes. The players can learn to balance school with football. Once fall arrives there will be focus and preparation for the upcoming semester. Enrolling early can help a player mentally as well. Playing football at the college level requires a large amount of mental toughness. Players have to learn how to keep up with a faster paced game and bigger components. A lot of players entering college dominated the game at the high school level, but once they enter the college most of the athletes will be at their same physical level. A learning curve in physical and mental adjustment is required.

One example of an early enrollee is Deshaun Watson, who played quarterback at Clemson and is now the starting quarterback for the Houston Texans (Moriarty, 2018). In an interview with the Associated Press Watson stated, “I missed my friends, my last semester of high school and all the memories, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I wanted to play as a freshman” (Moriarty, 2018 para. 14). It is safe to assume Watson’s early start paid off, because Watson went on to be a Heisman Trophy Finalist twice and led the Clemson Tigers to a National Championship Title. Along with Deshaun Watson other notable early enrollees include quarterbacks Jalen Hurts, Tua Tagovailoa, and Jake Fromm (Moriarty, 2018). Although there are many benefits to an athlete enrolling in college early, there are also risks associated with early enrolling.

A player risks injury with the decision to start college early in lieu of staying in high school for the last few months. If an athlete sustains a serious injury during spring training, that could easily impact their freshman season. Some argue that the player could sustain the same injury in high school, but the pressure to succeed during spring training might cause a player to overextend themselves. A freshman entering college at the traditional time already has pressure to perform well, but an early enrollee could feel more pressure to succeed and compete with their fellow teammates. It is important for the athlete to understand roles and safety rules while developing as a college player.

College Player Payments

One of the biggest controversies in The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is whether players should be paid for their name, image, and likeness. Players have been denied this right, because the NCAA wanted to keep a “collegiate model” and maintain a

distinction from professional leagues (Hobson, Strauss, 2019). One difference was to withhold profits from the revenue athletes were responsible for generating. Remember, one of the primary reasons that student-athletes select football as a sport is the hopes of financial gain in the NFL. If the financial support occurred at a collegiate level, then a family's financial hardship could be resolved sooner. There is hope that with new legislation and pressure placed on the NCAA, the anticipation of financial attainment can be acquired sooner. In September 2019, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed a bill called the Fair Pay to Play Act (Hobson, Strauss, 2019). This statute allows college athletes in the state of California to be compensated for their name, image, and likeness through endorsement deals, sponsorships, autograph signings and other similar income opportunities. The law will go into effect January 1, 2023 in California (Hobson, Strauss, 2019).

When the NCAA learned of the new bill in California, the committee members were not happy. The NCAA stated, "If the bill becomes law and California's 58 NCAA schools are compelled to allow an unrestricted name, image and likeness scheme, it would erase the critical distinction between college and professional athletics and because it gives those schools an unfair recruiting advantage, would result in them eventually being unable to compete in NCAA competitions" (Hobson, Strauss, 2019 para. 8). NCAA President Mark Emmert also sent a letter explaining that if the bill passes, the NCAA would eliminate national championship events and there would be other potential adverse impacts (Hobson, Strauss, 2019). The NCAA is also worried that if every state passes their own bill about student-athlete payments, then the NCAA would no longer be in harmony and the playing field would no longer be even (Hobson, Strauss, 2019).

However, the NCAA formed a committee to research student-athlete payments, but it is unknown how the conversation will develop. The State of California has sparked a conversation that student-athletes have longed for. By passing this bill, Newsome placed pressure on the NCAA to respond and take action (Hobson, Strauss, 2019). The NCAA can no longer ignore the problem and sweep it under the rug. This issue has received media attention from some of the most prominent athletes in the world.

For those that disagree with student-athlete payments, it is important to view the divergence among social groups. Some agree with the NCAA and that by paying student-athletes the principles that college sports should represent are disregarded. However, those that tend to agree with the NCAA are members of the middle to upper class and have always lived a secure life. There is privilege in having all of the basic necessities and not owning the burden of moving every six months because your parents lost their job or can no longer pay rent. There is privilege in walking outside without concern about a stray bullet. There is power in privilege and the oblivious situations taken for granted. It is important to view this situation from the athlete's perspective and then one may alter their ideas on student-athlete payments.

On the other hand, a member of the lower socio-economic group may classify student-athlete payments as a no-brainer. The idea is that the athletes work for the compensation and as a result deserve to be rewarded. There are some circumstances where the athlete previously provided an additional source of income for their families and while in college the family loses the extra support. The passing of the new bill allows the continuation of help to their families and possibly elevates them into a better financial situation. Some families place immense pressure on athletes to perform well in college in order to advance to the NFL.

However, this compensation of student-athletes can relieve some stress and allow emphasis on their education. After a quality education the sky's the limit allowing athletes to explore supplementary avenues to financial success. In the future, this new bill could be a pathway to achieve financial security for athletes and their families earlier in the process.

Emphasis or LACK OF an Emphasis on Education

A top-rated recruit has the opportunity to play at some of the most prestigious universities in The United States. The admission for these universities is extremely competitive and requires top grades, high standardized test scores, excessive hours of community service, and esteemed recommendation letters. For example, The University of Texas at Austin, has a 38.5% acceptance rate (prepscholar) which creates a very competitive pool of applicants for the university to select from. In many cases, student-athletes are not held to entrance requirements or the same standards as a traditional high school senior for college admission. Several players are known as "special admits" and usually have lower Grade Point Averages (GPA) and test scores (Jost, 2011). The NCAA has attempted to make tougher guidelines for student-athletes entering college. Since the 1980s, the NCAA has streamlined standards to ensure students are receiving a quality education (Jost, 2011). Students are now required to maintain a 2.3 GPA upon high school graduation and must have taken at least ten of the sixteen required courses before their senior year of high school (Jost, 2011).

Student-athletes are provided the unique opportunity to attend top tier four-year universities. In some instances, the likelihood of attending a high caliber university without playing a sport is unattainable. Again, financial hardships, lower scores due to poor preparation for entrance exams, and many other factors contribute to the situations. Although some athletes

lack in the category of grades or standardized test scores, the offer of immense talent is presented that traditional students cannot provide. The ability to play football at the college level is a rare gift that the average student does not possess. There are very few that can attest to running a forty yard dash in 4.4 seconds or can throw a football 65 yards. As a result, student-athletes are granted scholarships and receive admission assistance into top tier higher education institutions. There is still a power disparity that affects Black families directly. The NCAA relinquishes power to the schools and allows coaches to decide whose scholarships are renewed. Teams have a limited number of athletic scholarships and have the power to eliminate an underperforming player in order to grant a scholarship for a prospect. There is a troubling racial dynamic to this imbalance. The majority of football coaches and administrators are white. On the other hand, the majority of football athletes are black. When annual scholarships are not renewed, the hopes and dreams of the Black families are shattered, because of the emphasis on athletic development and being lured by the athletic system at a very young age.

Student-athletes have the responsibility to take advantage of their opportunities while enrolled in school. Although it is easy to understand how football would be their main focus, there should also be an emphasis on receiving a quality education that will benefit them in the future. Even if a student-athlete achieves their goal of playing in the NFL, the career tenure of professional football is limited. A career outside of football will ensure financial security long after retirement. In “Black Athletes Trail Whites in Graduation Rates” (Jost, 2011), discusses how college football has “increasingly come in conflict with colleges' core educational mission.” (pg. 1) This means that some schools are worried about winning football games more than ensuring athletes are still receiving a quality education. College football has become a

billion-dollar industry, allowing academic sacrifices to ensure football programs continue to thrive.

Louisiana State University (LSU) is just one example of this (Jost, 2011). At LSU, the state of Louisiana made tough budget cuts which forced the university to reduce academic spending (Jost, 2011). At the same time, the athletic program continued to expand the stadium and enhance their training facilities. Many citizens may wonder where the money goes. It is important to highlight that the athletic program has a separate budget from the academic budget and the two do not mix. However, at a glance it appears that the school places more emphasis on athletics than academics (Jost, 2011). The lack of concern for academics also translates into the graduation rate for these student-athletes.

At one point, only 48% of Division I players were graduating from college, with 55% of them being White and 22% of them being Black (Jost, 2011). Since then the numbers have slowly progressed, but it is impossible to ignore the gap between Black and White student-athletes. A 2010 study of the teams selected that year to play in a bowl game concluded there was a 67% graduation rate among those schools (Jost, 2011). The graduation rate for White athletes at those schools was 80% and the graduation rate for Black athletes was 60% (Jost, 2011). Although this is an incredible increase for student-athletes, there is still a gap. Why are Black athletes graduating at such lower rates?

One reason is that many Black athletes come from high schools that were in low socio-economic areas and likely did not have quality resources to prepare students for college. This automatically places Black student-athletes at a disadvantage. Athletes are already disadvantaged, because most of their time is dedicated to football and developing their craft.

There is a limited amount of time to study and focus on their academics. Josh Rosen, star quarterback of the University of California Los Angeles said in an interview with *Vox*, football and school do not go together, implying that college football has become a full-time job for players (Jost, 2011). Another unfortunate example of this is Dexter Manley. Dexter was a star defensive end at Oklahoma State who advanced to play professional football for the Washington Redskins. In front of a Congressional subcommittee in 1989, he confessed that he left Oklahoma State without knowing how to read or write (Jost, 2011).

Although this is an extreme example, it illustrates how Black athletes can fall through the cracks and are just passed along. Some Black athletes are not adequately prepared to deal with the academic demands that a rigorous four-year institution provides (Ting 2009). Demanding athletic schedules void adequate time to thoroughly understand class material. However, as long as athletes make plays on the field, most people are willing to turn a blind eye. Fortunately, some athletes understand the importance of education later in life and return to school with a new mindset.

A perfect example of this is Cardale Jones who played football at The Ohio State University. In 2012 Jones was a college freshman that did not value education and even tweeted, “Why should we have to go to class if we came here to play FOOTBALL, we ain’t come to play SCHOOL, classes are POINTLESS” (@CJ1two)”. This mindset is a direct reflection of why Black athletes are graduating at lower rates. If the athletes do not understand the importance of an education, they will not take school seriously. Fortunately, everyone has the power to alter their mindsets and that is exactly what Cardale Jones did. In 2015 Jones tweeted, “#TBT still can’t believe I tweeted something as stupid as this but hey, we live and we learn, after your

religion” (CJ1two). Cardale Jones was later drafted in the fourth round of the 2016 NFL draft by the Buffalo Bills, but most importantly he graduated from The Ohio State University in 2017 with a bachelor’s degree (Wilson 2017).

NFL Career Longevity

Big name players in the NFL, such as Drew Brees or Russell Wilson, are considered superstar athletes with long and successful careers. Unfortunately, this is not the reality for most NFL players. Several athletes in the NFL barely make the team each year. There is a fight for positions during training camp and worth must be proven on every play. Athletes move from the practice squad to the official roster and back to the practice squad time and time again. Not every athlete on the field does a million-dollar contract and guaranteed money. Several professional athletes are awarded a base salary which depends on the number years in the league. The minimum salary for a rookie is \$495,000 and the minimum increases each year (Eltringham, 2019). The athletes with million-dollar contracts and 10-year careers are the exception, not the standard.

According to the National Football League Players Association the average NFL career lasts 3.3 years (Keim, 2016). In summary, most athletes that make it to the NFL are retired by the age of 25 or 26. However, during the 2011 lockout, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said he believes the average NFL career lasts six years and around nine years for players that were drafted in the first round (Schalter, 2013). NFL Career Longevity is also affected by a player’s position. According to *The Bleacher Report*, the average starting quarterback plays an average of two seasons more than any other position (Schalter, 2013). This makes sense when considering a quarterback is the most protected player on the field.

Quarterbacks make major improvements on the field and in their understanding of the game between 22-25 years of age (Schalter, 2013). Quarterbacks see a plateau at age 25 and their stats remain fairly consistent until 30 years old. *The Bleacher Report* article states, “At year 10, there's a significant drop-off in peak AV, then a steady decline to year 15. The average, however, begins to trend upward as the poorer starters stop playing. The elites are not producing like elites anymore, but they are still very good and make up the majority of quarterbacks with careers that long” (Schalter, 2013 para. 28). Unfortunately, running backs do not have the same longevity as quarterbacks.

The stats for the first seven seasons for a top running back remain consistent. After the eighth year, running backs start to see a decline in their production and, by the ninth season, many will have retired. By the time a running back is 27 years old, their skills begin to “evaporate” (Schalter, 2013). Wide receivers are reported to be the most stable out of all the positions. From year two to year ten, the statistics for the average wide receiver stay fairly consistent. After year ten, there is a steady decline and the older starting wide receivers begin to retire. This is around age 32 for most receivers, with the exception of anomalies like Jerry Rice (Schalter, 2013).

Offensive Linemen have always been players that fly under the radar. There is a huge improvement for offensive linemen between year one and two (Schalter, 2013). Offensive linemen remain steady from years two through seven, but there is a drop for these players in year eight and another considerable drop in year twelve (Schalter, 2013). The defensive backs have proven themselves to be reliable and steady. Defensive backs are a group that consistently improve from year one to year sixteen (Schalter, 2013). The whole purpose of the Bleacher

Report article was to illustrate that there is no “age of doom” or “season of doom” for NFL players (Schalter, 2013, para. 68). Every position has different odds for career longevity and every player has their own journey in the NFL. Even though the average career for an NFL player is three years, many players last a lot longer than the three mark. NFL hopefuls should be realistic in their expectations, but hopeful to surpass the odds.

Regardless of the length of time in the NFL, there is a misconception that once an athlete is drafted to the NFL, success will follow for life. However, this is far from the truth. This is the primary reason that it is crucial for athletes to spend their money wisely while playing in the NFL. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research 78% of players are bankrupt within three years of retirement (Isidore, 2015). A young man that grew up in the projects with their family living paycheck to paycheck likely was never taught how to properly manage money. Due to a lack of education and family circumstances some athletes are not prepared to handle money responsibly. Lifestyles are upgraded, but there is no adequate training to maintain financial stability. After the player retires financial predicaments and hard times could follow. Modest money was saved during the league career and without a stable income the newly acquired lifestyle can no longer be afforded. For this reason 15.7% of NFL athletes file for bankruptcy within 12 years of leaving the league (Isidore, 2015) and, according to *Sports Illustrated*, “by the time they have been retired for two years, 78% of former NFL players have gone bankrupt or are under financial stress because of joblessness or divorce” (Isidore, 2015 para. 6).

It is important to understand how athletes are managing money and whether there is a sole dependency on the NFL to ensure financial stability for their families. If 15.7 percent of

NFL athletes are filing for bankruptcy, then their family is likely struggling once again as well. This ties into the lack of attention to education and the emphasis on sports. Although the attention to sports paid off, the lack of education and financial literacy becomes a detriment in the long run. All of these factors contribute to the rags to riches myth, but also affect the success of upward mobility in the Black community.

Alternatives to the NFL

Outside factors play a major role in the probability of an athlete's NFL goal. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), only 1.6% of all collegiate football players make it to the NFL. In college football, there are approximately 73,557 athletes and around 16,346 are eligible to be drafted (Sikkema, 2019). However, there are only 256 draft picks (Sikkema, 2019). The number of talented athletes in college football versus the odds do not seem to be in the athlete's favor. College athletes are talented and work hard to be the Greatest of All Time at their high school, but occasionally the hard work is not enough. Nonetheless, the dream continues.

Although the NFL will usually be the main goal for an athlete, alternative football leagues and a range of sports related careers are opportunities available to young athletes who aspire to use football as a vehicle for upward mobility. One alternative is the Canadian Football League (CFL) (Benjamin, 2019). The CFL is a professional football league in Canada that was created in 1958 (Benjamin, 2019). There are nine teams that play 18 games per season along with a championship game during the postseason (Benjamin, 2019). The main difference between the NFL and the CFL is that 12 players can be on the field in the CFL instead of 11 and the field is 110 yards, rather than 100 yards (Benjamin, 2019). The CFL is a great alternative to

the NFL, because the game is still played in the traditional sense with minor exceptions and athletes can still compete at a professional level. The average salary for a CFL player is between \$80,000 and \$85,000 per year with the average career lasting 3.2 years (Scott-Clarke 2012).

Another opportunity for athletes that do not play in the NFL is the Arena Football League (AFL) (Benjamin, 2019). In 1987, the AFL was introduced in the United States and is now the third longest running professional football league in North America. Today the AFL has four teams that play 12 games per season on a 50-yard field that is surrounded by walls (Benjamin, 2019). The AFL is known for playing football in a unique and upbeat tempo with a faster style of play. Although the AFL is different from the NFL, players can still showcase their athletic abilities on a professional stage. The average salary for an AFL player is between \$40,000 and \$50,000 per season, the league minimum is \$31,000 (Martino 2009).

The Canadian Football League and the Arena Football League are two leagues that have stood the test of time. Both leagues have found ways to be successful even with the steady and dominating success of the National Football League. Unfortunately, other leagues have not been able to find as much success as these three professional football leagues. One example of a failed league is the Alliance of American Football (AAF) (Benjamin, 2019). The AAF was created in 2019 and was composed of eight teams that would play ten games per season. The AAF was designed to complement the NFL by showcasing young, local, and developing talent that had hopes of eventually playing in the NFL. The AAF also strategically played their games in the spring when the NFL was in their off season. The AAF was expected to be a successful league due to their notable coaches and high ranked players, but by the middle of their first season everything came crashing down. On April 2, 2019 the AAF announced the suspension of league

operations and the season came to a sudden halt. Everyone lost their jobs that day and athletes no longer had a team contract (Rothstein, Wickersham, 2019). The AAF is an example of a league with promising potential that fell short due to money being mismanaged and poor decisions made by the executives.

There is always a gamble when an athlete agrees to play in a newly established league. New leagues can either be extremely successful or can end before it begins. It takes time for any successful professional football league to grow and unfortunately athletes are not protected from the growing pains. However, if these leagues are successful it can allow more athletes to fulfill their dream of playing professional football. The National Football League will still be the number one goal, but other secure alternatives can still provide a sense of security in their future and a way to achieve financial freedom for themselves and their families.

Along with professional leagues such as the CFL and the AFL, there are additional alternatives for athletes that do not make it to the NFL. Coaching is a great way for athletes to still be a part of football in a meaningful way. Coaches can play a huge role in an athlete's life and can help them navigate through life's challenges. A coach that has been in the same shoes can guide an athlete to make sound decisions and can teach the younger generation of athletes how to avoid similar mistakes. Ex-athletes have the opportunity to be the role model a young boy needs to excel in life on the field and off the field.

Another profession in lieu of playing professional football or after is to become a sports commentator. A sports commentator shares live commentary on a game, breaks down detailed game analysis, and shares personal anecdotes while a live game is played. A sports commentator has to have a vast knowledge of the game and has to be able to respond quickly to the actions

during the game. Athletes have the biggest advantage, because playing the game provides insight that a normal person would not have. A sports commentator is a great way for an athlete to still use their talents in an alternate fashion.

There are countless careers that athletes can pursue instead of playing in the NFL and can still find ways to be connected to the love of the sport. I analyzed a range of Texas football players with varying socio-economic backgrounds, then conducted a handful of interviews discussing topics related to childhood, family, and aspirations after football. An ex-Texas player, I will refer to as C.T. from the University of Texas stated the following, “I completed four years at The University of Texas at Austin, graduated, and started a professional job immediately. Although I always had a goal of playing in the NFL, I also understood the importance of education. I never wanted to put my eggs in one basket and instead focused on several avenues of success other than a professional career in football. I understood the odds of any athlete having a successful football career and knew that I needed to have other plans”. When asked at what point in his college career did he realize he would not play in the NFL, C.T. explained that, “After my sophomore season at The University of Texas at Austin, I realized that I would not play in the NFL. The realization was a positive moment. I was excited to start exploring other avenues”. Although C.T. does not play in the NFL, he is still involved with sports. C.T is currently working for a nutrition company that focuses on athletic training and providing healthy meals for the athletes.

Part 1 (Inspiring Rags to Riches Stories)

The remarkable rise from homelessness to NFL stardom was well presented during the Super Bowl LIV commercial produced by Kia. The commercial begins with a young Black boy

running in a neighborhood and NFL star Josh Jacobs is driving. The boy running is his younger self and he is giving him advice. Josh reminisces on the fact that growing up homeless will be hard, he has to keep believing in himself (Kia, 2020). He has to be tougher than anything life will throw at him and football will be his escape. He tells his younger self that even though things are hard one day he will prove himself to be the best and all of his hard work will pay off. The commercial ends with the phrase “Give it Everything” appearing on the screen and flashes images of Josh Jacobs making his debut in the NFL (Kia, 2020).

This narrative is an example of the “rags to riches” story. Such stories are used as a source of inspiration. The Thought Catalog explains, “Rags to riches stories are meant to motivate you. They show you that anybody can achieve their dreams, no matter how much money their parents had in the bank account when they were younger or how many dead-end jobs they had to work in order to pay the rent” (Nelson, 2018, para. 1). Most can probably give at least one real life example of an athlete with a story mentioned above.

It seems that every few months there is a new documentary film produced for Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) 30 for 30 series highlighting a Black athlete that overcame significant adversity in order to achieve his current success. An ESPN 30 for 30 Film titled “Deion’s Double Play” highlights Deion Sanders “rags to riches” myth. He grew up in a poor and underserved neighborhood and became a successful player in the NFL. Stories highlighting Sanders and other athletes are important and ones that deserve to be celebrated. However, it is interesting how the media has used that story to transform the perception people have of Black athletes. The stereotype can easily be described as the norm for Black men in professional sports. When headlines are read of a Black athlete with a progressive

story fans are usually shocked, because the progressive stories are often not highlighted by the media.

It is understandable why the “rags to riches” narrative is celebrated. It is because this story deserves to be celebrated. In an article released by *The Sportster* titled, “10 athletes who were rich before going Pro and 10 athletes who were broke,” the article highlights athletes that were at huge disadvantages growing up and had to work twice as hard as everyone else to achieve goals (Honorato, 2018). The reporter states, “When people think about professional sports and professional athletes two things usually come to mind. The first one is greatness. The second thing we connect to professional sports and athletes is wealth. However, what most people forget is that before becoming the powerhouses and millionaires of today, several professional athletes had to struggle to survive. Some athletes came from poverty-stricken backgrounds and had to help provide for their families even when they were kids” (Honorato, 2018, para. 1).

A few Black men that were dealt the same cards as successful athletes did not escape their environment and are now in jail, recovering from drug addictions, or struggling to provide for their families. Overcoming adversity is not an easy feat and there were many sacrifices to ensure the athlete did not fall to the wayside and become the norm. There were coaches that personally transported athletes with pick up and drop offs at school, in order to avoid encounters with gangs or drug deals. There were teachers that spent extra time with an athlete reviewing material and recognized the potential to overcome his current situation. This athlete also had a family that encouraged him as often as possible. The parent might not have had the resources to send him to the best school or provide the best living environment, but the necessary support was

provided to ensure success. These stories are truly inspiring and deserve recognition. If it were not for the advocates that assisted athletes along the way or circumvented mixing with the wrong crowd, athletes would be less likely to succeed. The fact that an athlete is able to provide a better life for himself and his family through his success on the field and hard work is truly admirable.

In today's society, social media is powerful. Breaking News is received on an athlete's cell phone instantly and the search for facts or rumors are returned in a flash. Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are three social media platforms that have transformed how we view the world and what we believe. There is instant insight into your daily interaction at that exact moment or details on feelings about the latest news story that was published two minutes ago. This generation is unfiltered and anything goes. There was a time when people were not held accountable for a racist remark or an inappropriate incident, because there was never any proof. However, social media has unleashed endless possibilities. It takes only one person to bring awareness to an event or tweet about an occurrence.

The media also has the power to influence perceptions and how the world views a situation. The media has the ability to highlight negative or positive stories. The media usually publishes the stories that will generate the most attention and the most revenue for the company. There are millions of noteworthy stories happening in the world that we will never see, because such stories are not covered by the media. However, it seems that the same rags to riches stories are highlighted in the news just with different subjects. This is most noticeable in the sports world among talented athletes with unique and inspiring stories. The experience of overcoming adversity in order to achieve a goal and arrive at a happy place is widespread. Again, all of these stories deserve to be celebrated.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. The media tends to highlight the success stories or the athletes that had to overcome poverty or family hardships to achieve success. Very rarely is a story aired by ESPN where a Black athlete from a two-parent middle class household, followed a straight and narrow path, attended college, and was successfully drafted as a NFL player. Even though this story is prevalent in many different forms, a Black athlete is not considered as the traditional narrative. The story commonly told by the media is the story of the Black athlete that came from nothing, the story of persistence. The story that entails no matter what hand was dealt, he continued to push forward and work hard. The story of refusal to become a product of an environment and to stop at nothing until he reached his goals. Even though the story entailed growing up in a single parent household in government housing, the responsibility to care for his younger siblings, and help put food on the table, he still persisted. The story of arriving at school early to work on his craft or stay late to perfect his footwork. The story of reaching senior year of high school as a five-star recruit with offers from universities all over the country.

ESPN attended his signing day and millions of people watched to see where this kid, with such a tough journey, would end up going to college for the next three to four years. Fast forward to his time in college and his superstardom, living up to the hype, and creating a name for himself. The story entails his decision to leave college early, enter the draft, and becomes a first round draft pick. Then he signs a million dollar contract and is watching all of his dreams come true. His family no longer has to live in government housing or struggle to put food on the table. He purchases a dream home for his mother and provides for his siblings. This athlete now has an endorsement deal with Nike, has everything he needs, and then some. Regardless of the cards he was given, he persisted and now his hard work has come to fruition. This is what the sports

world would view as a success story and will broadcast it to the world. Now, when he is playing games on the field, instead of talking about his talent or the play he just made, commentators are recapping his rags to riches story. The things he had to go through with his mom, how he had to go some nights without eating, and any of the other struggles he was facing. It almost becomes more about his journey than his talent, but the media knows that this story will captivate the attention and the hearts of fans around the world and will highlight it repeatedly.

The Bleacher Report released an article about the top 12 most inspiring rags to riches stories. In the introduction, the author states, “Rags-to-riches stories are just one of the many things we love in sports. We can’t get enough of these tales and the athletes who are part of them. The beauty of a real rags to riches story is that it does not always start from childhood. The story can take place during college or even during time as a professional. Athletes who are overlooked, underrated and forgotten fit that category. So without having to wait any longer, let’s take a look at some of the best rags-to-riches stories in professional sports” (King, 2014, para. 1). This illustrates the positivity surrounding the myth and how others use it as a source of inspiration. The average person may preview this list and think that an athlete’s accomplished success is universal. This type of inspiration is unmatched and could be a blueprint on how to work harder and wait for better days.

The first person on this list is Michael Oher (King, 2018). Michael Oher was the inspiration of the “The Blindside” starring Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw. Michael Oher had a difficult childhood and had to endure many hardships. He bounced from house to house and lacked the adequate support required for a child to grow and prosper. He was constantly introduced to unstable environments that was affecting him mentally, emotionally, and was

preventing him from succeeding in school. The situation changed when Oher was adopted by Leigh Anne Tuohy and her family. The family welcomed Oher into their home and helped him with his academics. He was already a great athlete, but the family enhanced his development as a player and to receive the attention required to gain a D-I Football Scholarship. Michael Oher progressed to play football at Ole Miss in Mississippi and was later selected in the first round of the NFL draft. Michael Oher is now far from a young kid struggling on the streets and has secured the financial security he was longing for as a kid.

It is hard not to learn of Michael Oher's story and not be inspired. He endured adversities in his young life that some people are fortunate to never experience. He can be a source of motivation for someone in a similar predicament or his story can force a person to alter their perspective. Oher's story can enlist others to find ways to release troubles and focus on good fortune.

The Blind Side is one example of Hollywood creating movies inspired by stories of inspiration and struggle. The goal of these movies are to inspire the audience and generate millions in revenue. The only problem is that these movies can often misconstrue the truth or can negatively impact the inspiration of the movie's real life. In order to develop the story into an interesting and successful movie events are dramatized, exaggerated, or even left out all together. This is why at the beginning of the movie the screen flashes, inspired on a true story or based on a true story. The story is not one hundred percent accurate and that can cause the inspiration of the movie to leave a negative review.

Michael Oher understood that some dramatics were going to be added to The Blind Side, but some of them left him extremely disappointed. In the movie Sandra Bullock, who plays his

mother, Leigh Anna Tuohy, went onto the field to help Michael understand how to play his position. In reality, Michael Oher shared that never happened and he knew how to play football long before he entered the Tuohy home. "I've always had that fire and passion in me on the field. You can't put aggression into a person. It's impossible. Either you have that toughness or you don't," stated Oher in an interview (Ewing, 2018, para. 18).

In an interview with ESPN, Michael Oher also explained that the movie has impacted his real life negatively (Newton, 2015). Oher feels like the movie has taken away from his talent on the field and the work he has put in to perfect his craft. Michael Oher states, "I'm not trying to prove anything," Oher said. "People look at me, and they take things away from me because of a movie. They don't really see the skills and the kind of player I am. That's why I get downgraded so much, because of something off the field. This stuff, calling me a bust, people saying if I can play or not ... that has nothing to do with football. It's something else off the field. That's why I don't like that movie" (Newton, 2015 para. 4). Michael Oher is the perfect example of how a rags to riches story can be misconstrued in order to gain emotional appeal from a particular audience.

In an article by Yahoo Finance athletes with successful rags to riches stories that have also successfully managed to save money are discussed (Olya, 2020). The article reflects upon the fact that although most of the rags to riches athletes enter into the NFL, financial security is not achieved due to irresponsible spending (Olya, 2020). The athletes highlighted in this article all grew up without money, but made successful financial decisions. The article states, "Even if you're not a rich athlete, these rags-to riches stories can help you handle your own finances

better” (Olya, 2020, para. 2). One athlete highlighted is Victor Cruz. The lesson people can learn from Victor is “Save as much as you can” (Olya, 2020, para. 8).

Victor Cruz grew up in Paterson, New Jersey in an area filled with drugs and gang violence (Olya, 2020). He was raised by a single mother who did her best to provide for him. Victor Cruz played six seasons with the New York Giants and is now an NFL analyst for ESPN. In 2010 when Cruz was drafted, he signed a 1.22 million dollar contract. Instead of buying himself a new car with his first paycheck, he decided to deposit the check in the bank. Victor Cruz on Kneading Dough said “That first check was probably the largest check I’ve ever seen with my own eyes at that time, so I saved it. I wanted to make sure that this isn’t the last check that I receive. I wanted to make sure every check from here on out I saved and multiplied” (Olya, 2020, para. 9).

In a documentary titled “I am Giant: Players Fall. Champions Rise,” the audience watches Victor Cruz recover from a devastating knee injury. Cruz reveals incidents from his past and how the challenges he faced have all shaped him into the man he is today. Cruz discusses that fact that he was sent home from the University of Massachusetts after his freshman year due to poor grades and that his father committed suicide soon after. He talks about how it took those events for him to wake up and turn his life around in order to become the star wide receiver he is known as today. At the end of the documentary Cruz says, “Football is a source of life to me, football was a way out. Football was a way to get my education paid for, to get my family taken care of.”

Victor Cruz is someone who did not let adversity alter his goals. It takes dedication, focus, and heart to get kicked out of college and then return to the same university. Most young

men that were expelled from school due to poor grades would stay home and succumb to their environment. Cruz knew that if he could succeed academically and on the field, football could be his “ticket” out.

Victor Cruz can serve as a great example for a young Black boy aspiring to play in the NFL. Cruz teaches young boys that life is a journey and can change at any time. Even though there is financial wellbeing currently, everything can change a day later. For these reasons it is important that athletes save money and spend it wisely. Victor Cruz’s story teaches that playing in the NFL does not automatically equate to a lavish lifestyle. This rags to riches story shared by the media can teach important lessons that can take an athlete to the next level.

Along with individual players, the rags to riches myth is also used to describe teams in the NFL. Teams described as rags to riches usually have long and consistent losing seasons. The teams perform poorly year after year and have little hope of improvement. However, after talented draft picks, new coaches, or an improved playbook time turns the situation around. After horrible seasons and years of growth, the team began to improve and finally advance to the playoffs and maybe even to the Superbowl.

ESPN released an article called, “Who’s the NFL’s Next Rags to Riches Team?” They stated “the St. Louis Rams went from 4-12 (and last in the NFC West) to a combined 16-3 and won Super Bowl XXXIV. Then the Baltimore Ravens turned an 8-8 mark into 16-4 and won Super Bowl XXXV. Last year, perhaps most improbable, the New England Patriots -- 5-11 and last in the AFC East in 2000 -- ripped off a 14-5 record and stunned the Rams in Super Bowl XXXVI” (Garber, 2002, para. 2). There are educated guesses on who the next team would be to make a comeback and positive turn around. Even though it is hard to believe in 2020, the New

England Patriots were once considered a rags to riches team, because the team has been extremely successful within the last 10 years. The Patriots are a great example of how even though a team struggles in the present. Hard work and good decisions can result in an extremely successful team in the future. This narrative once again highlights the rags to riches myth in a positive light.

There are very few people who are not instantly inspired by a rag to riches story. Even if a person has heard a story with similar struggles, it is hard not to feel inspired by a person's tenacity and bravery. In an article titled, "Why We're Wired to Love Rags to Riches Stories, the author talks about how our brains are wired for the classic story (Gallo, 2017). "We grow from traumatic events because it's in our DNA to turn past tragedies into today's advantage" (Gallo, 2017, para. 8). People have the belief that the best things in life are produced from struggle. "We like stories with a diamond at the end, a satisfying resolution to the struggle. Inspiring leaders often speak in the story of adversity to create an emotional bond with their audiences" (Gallo, 2017, para. 10). Emotional appeal is a powerful persuasive strategy that is used in commercials, movies, and when people are asking for financial support. It is hard for a person to walk past a child asking for money on the street that appears homeless or even a sweet young girl selling lemonade in her neighborhood. Both of these children have an emotional appeal that entices a person to provide their needs. A person can either relate to the specific situation or just feel a moral obligation, but regardless of the reason the strategy usually works.

The rags to riches stories have the same emotional appeal. People share stories to inspire those around them and to persuade others to donate to the supported cause. If a professional athlete experienced homelessness as a child, the athlete might be invited to speak at a charity

gala to raise money for homeless or at risk youth. Their real life tragedy can be turned into a way to prevent future children from having to endure the same hardships. Some might say that people are exploiting a person's story in order to make money, but others might say a person is using their story for good. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but either way an emotional bond was created. There is power in a person sharing their story, especially a story that includes hardships and pain. One positive aspect of a rags to riches story is that it can inspire and motivate someone that is experiencing a similar struggle. An athlete's story can provide insight and advice on how to navigate poverty while playing sports and attending college.

While these stories deserve to be celebrated, I believe that there is a downside to the rags to riches narrative. This narrative has altered the perception of not only adults around the world, but young impressionable children as well. When young boys, particularly young Black boys are watching television, this is the story often seen. The story of a Black man that grew up in a poor neighborhood, got a full academic scholarship to college, and is now a successful businessman or studying to become a doctor is overlooked. Instead sports as the path for success, fame, and fortune are highlighted. Although, there is nothing wrong with sports as a source for financial stability, it is usually the only path presented. This can create a sense of tunnel vision and narrow-mindedness. These young boys might not realize the potential paths for success, because only one path is highlighted on the news and on social media. These athletes become role models and a desired pattern. Football is viewed as a path which afforded athletes the privileges of buying a big house, owning fancy cars, and taking exotic vacations. Their once limitless imaginations, now only focuses on making it to the NFL and living the good life. It is important to note that there is nothing wrong with this goal, but the media has influenced this as the only

goal that Black boys can attain. That is why there is a downside to the “rags to riches” narrative. It creates a false sense of reality and creates dreams that are so specific, boys are willing to throw everything else away. Chances for financial stability through education are discarded to focus solely on one avenue believed to generate financial freedom.

In an article from Business Insider titled, “10 ways athletes go from Riches to Rags,” the author discusses how athletes end up back in the tough financial predicaments they were in as kids (Delevingne, 2010). One of the primary causes is bad investments (Delevingne, 2010). Due to little or no business background, athletes do not always make the best financial decisions with their money (Delevingne, 2010). Another cause of poor financial status is divorce. According to the New York Times, the divorce rate for athletes is extremely high. This is because of, "rampant infidelity, women who target athletes, trophy wives, lifestyles not conducive to marriage and players being surrounded by entourages, which can discourage intimacy" (Delevigne, 2010, para. 8). Another reason mentioned is having too many kids. One example is former NFL player Travis Henry, “The New York Times reported recently that Henry, 30, a former NFL running back who played for three teams from 2001 to 2007, has nine children — each by a different mother, some born as closely as a few months apart. Henry says he's broke, and cannot afford the estimated \$170,000 in child support he owes per year” (Delevigne, 2010, para.14). These are the stories and examples that are not as celebrated when it comes to the rags to riches myth. That is why it is important not to place too much of an emphasis on generating success through the NFL. The harsh realities that come with professional sports should be discussed just as much as the success that also comes with it.

It is important to not only highlight the stories of success on the field, but off the field as well. There are plenty of collegiate athletes that did not make it to the NFL, but are successful in their own right. Instead of solely focusing on athletic abilities, the value of education and all of the possibilities with their perspective degrees are achieved. These stories also deserve to be highlighted, not solely for the recognition of the individual, but so young boys can understand that there are options off the field as well. This narrative has created a society that idolizes the sports world and the power it has to change the lives of families around the United States.

“The Role of Sports in the Black Community” begins with a quote from Charles Ferrell, a director of Rainbow Coalition for Fairness in Athletics (Harris, 2012). He states, “Athletics is to the Black community what technology is to the Japanese and what oil is to the Arabs. We’re allowing that commodity to be exploited. We really need to turn it around. If those schools cannot do for us what we need done, i.e. provide education for the next generation, then we should be looking to steer clear of those Institutions” (Harris, 2012, page 311). Although universities are providing student-athletes the opportunity to play sports at an elite level, these universities also have a duty to ensure that a quality education is received. Without a quality education, the athlete will usually find themselves back in the same neighborhoods once sought to escape.

A topic that needs to be considered when examining the rags to riches myth, is language. Language is a powerful tool that can determine how a story is interpreted. The adjectives used to describe a person can paint a specific image in the reader’s mind and allow them to make inferences about the situation at hand. In “Characterizations of Criminal Athletes: A Systematic Examination of Sports News Depictions of Race and Crime” the authors discuss the frequency

and quality of newspaper coverage of race and crime in sports news (Blecha, Mastro, Seate, 2011). The authors discovered that African American athletes are disproportionately presented in comparison to the actual demographics of sports as a whole. The authors also reported that African Americans were characterized in a negative manner (Blecha, Mastro, Seate, 2011).

When an athlete is involved in a scandal, the whole world stops to take notice. Whether an athlete was involved in a domestic altercation or an athlete was arrested, people want to know all the facts. Sports and crime stories are two of the most prevalent and widely followed segments in the news (Kohut, 2001). “When it comes to news coverage intersecting crime and race, Blacks (particularly males) are portrayed as violent, dangerous, and nameless criminals (Entman, 1992; Oliver, 2003). In addition, they are less likely (compared with Whites) to be shown in professional attire or to be presented in stories offering pro- defense information/imagery or sound-bites” (Entman, 1992, 1994). It is important to discuss how black athletes are being framed outside of the rags to riches context. When the popular press covers black athletes who fit the rags to riches frame, the tone of the piece is usually positive. The portion of the story discussing their struggles likely has sad undertones, but the writer still finds a way to spin the portion of the story into something positive.

For example, Tyrann Mathieu is the perfect example of a “rags to riches” story. In an article in the *Men’s Journal*, Mathieu is described as a Warrior. Tyrann Mathieu has twenty-two crosses tattooed on his right knee to honor the people in his life that have passed away (Layman 2016). Mathieu lacked stability as a child after he was abandoned by his mother at a young age. Mathieu lived with his grandmother until she passed away, and then went on to live with his Uncle. The hardships continued for Mathieu, a New Orleans native, when Hurricane Katrina hit.

His family was homeless for a year, while they struggled to pick up the pieces (Layman 2016). When Tyrann Mathieu got to college his luck did not seem to change, due to being released from the LSU football team for drug violations (Layman 2016). Nevertheless, Tyrann Mathieu persisted and made his way to the NFL. Mathieu now plays safety for the Kansas City Chiefs and was vital to their 2020 Super Bowl Win. Although the author is highlighting a difficult time in Mathieu's life, he is not using demeaning language or demoralizing Mathieu as a person. The author is remaining neutral and illustrating the story in simple language.

Unfortunately, every Black man is not given the same respect when stories are displayed of them in the news. Black men are lumped in the same category and people assume every black man has the same story and poor character. When a black man is arrested he is not given the privilege of "innocent until proven guilty." A Black man is perceived as guilty just for being in the area when a crime took place and the language used by the media supports that claim. "Indeed not only are Blacks disproportionately featured as perpetrators in the news, but this discrepancy is exacerbated when the news reports focus on felony crimes....Simply put, in news reporting on crime, Blacks are characterized unfavorably and inaccurately on both a comparative and absolute basis" (Blecha, Mastro, Seate, 2011).

In a Netflix series titled "All-American" a young Black high school football star named Spencer James transfers to a school in Beverly Hills, California from Crenshaw, California to play football. Black men from Crenshaw are expected to be in gangs, always getting into trouble, and a menace to society. However, Spencer worked hard to ensure he made straight A's in school, excelled on the football field, and most importantly Spencer stayed out of trouble. One night Spencer gets shot and is rushed to the hospital. When he arrives he is fighting for his life

and is struggling to survive. The white doctors and nurses assume the worst about him and believe that because he was shot, then he is associated with a gang or violence. A black nurse had to fight for him to receive the quality care that a white patient would receive with no question. Although this is a scripted television series, the show reaffirms that these biases are ingrained into our society.

Part 2 (Upward Mobility)

The rags to riches narrative also illustrates the need for families to strive for upward mobility. Upward mobility is defined as, “the capacity or facility for rising to a higher social or economic position” (Webster, 2020). Upward mobility can be measured through income, wages, health, wealth, and education. Upward mobility can also be measured in absolute terms. Based on the comparison of how an athlete is performing financially to how their parents were performing financially at that same age. If the athlete is earning more money than their parents were at that age, then this is an indication of achieving upward mobility.

In an interview with a current Texas football player, I will refer to as R.J. it was interesting to see his view of football and ways to achieve upward mobility. After a successful freshman season, it is no surprise he has huge hopes of playing in the NFL one day. Something that stood out when talking to the athlete is that he explained how he would use the financial gains from the NFL solely as a way to get other things started. R.J. said, “In the future I want to have several different businesses. One that I have already started working on is my clothing line. I already have a name for the line, I am just in the process of getting it patented.” It was clear in the interview that in the future financial stability was a goal for this R.J. He understood that even though the NFL can help him financially, other businesses will ensure his financial success later

down the road. This was refreshing to see from a 19 year old who is expected to have a very successful career at The University of Texas at Austin and beyond.

Everyone desires to have financial stability. The satisfaction of attaining the necessary means to meet monthly financial obligations and to provide food, clothes, and shelter is a privilege rather than an expectation. In this day and time poverty in America is unsettling. Families do not deserve to struggle or live paycheck to paycheck, but this is one reason rapid returns and the willingness to do whatever it takes to ensure a comfortable life is strived for. A primary example is adults attending college to complete a degree or start a new degree not pursued as a youngster. Another example would be conquering a master's degree in their perspective fields, because a bachelor's degree just is not enough. Men and women are learning new trades in addition to working side jobs in order to afford a dream vacation or wedding. Even as adults, we are continually in search for and striving for more financial freedom.

A parent's desire is to provide children with resources to aid in a successful and secure adult life, but this requires financial stability. The access to the best education and experiences of different cultures and art are all within a heart's desire for a good life. A parent will sacrifice their basic needs to ensure a child is equipped with essentials. In a perfect world this situation would not require a struggle to provide, but for many families this is not the reality.

Upward mobility is particularly a goal for Black and brown communities across the United States. For so long, minority groups have been oppressed in this country and were not afforded the same privileges as White Americans and are required to work twice as hard to prove themselves in professional spaces. In "Race, Class, and the Dilemmas of Upward Mobility for African Americans", the author, Elizabeth Cole, discusses how education is the biggest hope for

African Americans to achieve upward mobility and how the class of African American is born into can be just as detrimental to their life chances and success as their race (Cole, 2003). However, it is important to note that intersectionality plays a huge role in this case. It is impossible not to mention the influence of one without the influence of another, they are interconnected.

This article also discusses the importance of class distributions in the Black community. Since slavery there has been status divisions, that further divides the race. The “mulattos” which were slaves that were mixed with Black and White were considered better and above full raced African Americans (Cole, 2003). This separation is still present today when people compare light-skinned Black people to darker-skinned Black people. There is a notion that the lighter a Black person’s skin, the more privileges received and the more acceptance received by White America. The article also discusses how today, the Black elite subconsciously separate themselves within the Black community (Cole, 2003). Long standing African American social groups such as Jack and Jill of America, Incorporated and The Links, Incorporated, control the power to decide who deserves to be accepted into their circle. Family background, education, and occupation are just a few of the unwritten criteria analyzed upon membership interest.

The authors also discuss post emancipation, Blacks were not afforded many opportunities for work and were assigned low paying jobs with no opportunity to move up the chain. Upon migrating to the north Black people began to accomplish real financial growth and upward mobility (Cole, 2003). At this time Blacks started to develop a middle class. After the Jim Crow Laws were lifted, the Black middle class blossomed. Between 1960-1970 the Black middle class almost doubled (Landry, 1987). Blacks were given more opportunities for work and truly started

to thrive. Black leaders in the community recognized that there had to be a change if serious growth was to continue. The Black community would have to work together, because division would tear them apart. This sparked the idea of uplift (Gaines, 1996). This movement preached that Blacks were required to help other Blacks in order to succeed. The upper class Blacks had to reach down and help middle class Blacks through advice, access to job opportunities, and career development. This ideology was often taught by pastors and prominent community leaders. Although, this idea met some resistance, when it was implemented it was proven to be helpful.

The next topic discussed in the article highlighted education in the Black community. When it comes to school administrators and Black youth, the subject becomes complicated. In 1999, there was a study performed at an entirely Black High School to examine the dynamic between administrators and students. One specific School District started a new initiative with the hopes of improving academics and evoking change (Cousins, 1999). The initiative was called, “The Pride is Back” and the goal was to promote academic achievement, stable family life, respect for elders, and sexual responsibility. The school’s expectation of this movement would combat behavior viewed as “underclass.” This behavior included: dress styles, social behavior, and the music listened to. The administration desired to incorporate the “uplift” ideology with the hopes of altering their lifestyles to reflect middle and upper class America (Cousins, 1999).

However, it was interesting to note that Cousins said that class identities were not relevant to the behavior of the students at the school. Some middle class students acted like “wannabe gangsters” even though that lifestyle had never been experienced. While lower class students were reported to follow the ideologies of “The Pride is Back” initiative. This shows that

the beliefs of the school administrators are incorrect. Sitting down with Black students to understand the individuals and their behavior did not occur. Administrators just simply clumped them together and labeled them as “stereotypical” Black students (Cousins, 1999).

Social class is complex and has several dimensions. The study of Cousins drew three different conclusions. First, individuals actively shape class as they engage in different class practices across time and contexts (Cousins, 1999). Second, schools work to instill particular meanings of class and classed-identities in students (Cousins, 1999). Third, Cousins shows how class identities and performances are gendered, thus drawing attention again to the centrality of the concept of intersectionality to the psychological study of class (Cousins, 1999). A takeaway from this study is that a person is not solely defined by their class and although it is a part of who they are, it might not play a role in shaping their identity.

Although upward mobility is a goal for the Black community, the numbers tell a different story. According to *Vox*, only 2.5% of Black kids that grow up in the bottom fifth of the income distribution climb into the top fifth of the income distribution (Matthews, 2018). This is in comparison to White children, where 10.6% of those who grow up in the bottom fifth make it to the top fifth of the income distribution (Matthews, 2018). Although achieving this goal is complicated for all, the wealth gap between Black men and White men still leads to a considerable difference between the Black and White population (Matthews, 2018).

Black men that are born into the top 75th percentile of the income distribution grow up to be 12 percentiles lower in the distribution compared to White men that were born in the same bracket (Matthews, 2018). The segregation becomes bigger when considering that there are fewer Black families in the top 75th percentile than White families (Matthews, 2018). This

causes the gap to be extended even greater. However, *Vox* reported the exact opposite for Black women. Black women that were born into the same bracket as White women tend to outperform them in salary earnings (Matthews, 2018). This does not mean however that Black women are earning the same as White women. In 2016, White women that were working full time earned an average of \$57, 559 and Black women earned an average of \$45,261 (Matthews, 2018). *Vox* believes that the rationale of Black women outperforming White women in salary earnings even though White women make more on average, is because White women choose to be stay at home moms more than Black women (Matthews, 2018). Black women also work more hours and at a higher rate. This shows that Blacks are working twice as hard as their White women counterparts to earn an equal amount or more in salary earnings (Matthews, 2018).

Different scholars on the subject all have varying opinions on why there is a wealth gap between Black and White communities. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, the authors of “The Bell Curve”, believe that Blacks are less intelligent than Whites and the gap is due to genetics. They also believe that investments in Black neighborhoods, affirmative action, and reparations are all ineffective. There is also a belief that lower marriage rates and higher single parent households in the Black community contribute to the income gap. However, the gap still persisted even when only considering two parent households.

In every scenario, Blacks are at a disadvantage in comparison to Whites. “The challenge is that very few Black children are raised in environments that foster upward mobility. Fewer than 5% of Black children are reared in areas with a poverty rate below 10%. In contrast, 63% of White children grow up in analogous conditions” (Chetty, Hendron). Outside factors play a

major role in upward mobility, as well as societal standards. Resulting in the challenge of upward mobility for the Black community.

Another interesting fact regarding upward mobility, is that Hispanic Americans are moving up the income distributions across generations, while Blacks and Indians are not. According to “Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States,” “Hispanics are therefore on a path to moving up substantially in the income distribution across generations, potentially closing much of the present gap between their incomes and those of White Americans” (Matthews, 2018, para. 10). Black and American Indian children also have higher rates of downward mobility than any other races. This means that Blacks and Indians are moving down in the income distribution across generations rather than moving up. Black children born to parents in the top income bracket are almost as likely to fall to a lower bracket as they are to remain in the top bracket. Economic mobility for minorities is not easy, but it is interesting how Hispanics are performing so well. This might be due to Hispanic’s being the largest minority race in the United States or other outside factors.

There is a belief that in the United States that everyone is capable of living the American Dream. Through hard work the achievement of any goal is attainable, including financial freedom. However, data shows that this is not true for every race in the United States and even if a minority does achieve financial freedom, are they truly free? For some, wealth equals power. If there is money then opinions matter more than others and there will be an accomplishment of goals that the average person could not achieve. However, this is not true of Black athletes in the NFL. When Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the National Anthem, his financial income or wealth was not taken into consideration. Instead he was viewed as a Black man kneeling on

the ground and multitudes were furious. Among those furious was President Donald Trump. He saw athletes kneeling as a sign of disrespect when actually the kneeling was intended to bring awareness to the violence and racial inequality that the Black Community is experiencing. In an article by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) called, “For Black Athletes Wealth does not equal Freedom,” the author stated, “Trump’s attacks on the NFL protestors are rooted in those competing tensions inherent to the American Dream: that wealth equals freedom; that economic privilege demands patriotic gratitude; and most importantly, that Black people’s individual economic prosperity invalidates their concerns about systemic injustice and requires their silence on racial oppression” (Rigueur, 2017, para. 14).

Although there is a belief that universities are taking responsibility to ensure student-athletes receive a quality education, The University of Texas at Austin appears to be making an effort to not only produce quality athletes, but educated athletes. In an interview with a current Texas football player, I will refer to as D.Y, he discussed his childhood and goal of playing in the NFL. As a child his family faced tragedy when their house and all belongings were lost in a house fire. His family finances and his life were turned upside down. D.YH discussed the downfall of homelessness for a period of time and the struggles his family faced to get back on their feet. D.Y. mentioned that this event made him stronger and changed his outlook on life. “I don’t look at my house burning down as a setback or challenge. Even though it was hard at the time, the situation helped to shape me into the person I am today.” Fortunately, sports was always an outlet for D.Y. and he knew he had the talent to pursue football post high school.

When asked if his current goal entails playing in the NFL, he said yes without hesitation. “I think any player given the opportunity to play in the NFL would take it, it is a once in a

lifetime opportunity.” However, D.Y. described the NFL as “a way to get things started.” When asked to explain further he stated, “Yes playing in the NFL is a goal, but I have several other goals as well. I definitely want to start my own business and generate several different sources of income.” D.Y. is an example of a player that has turned their hardships into motivation and like him, there are countless numbers of athletes that have rags to riches stories that have journeyed through The University of Texas at Austin. Some still have their riches and others do not. Earl Campbell and Ricky Williams are two Texas superstars that are successful rags to riches stories that young athletes can learn from and be inspired by.

(Earl Campbell)

Earl Campbell was born March 29, 1955 in Tyler, Texas (Heisman.com). He was the fifth eldest of eleven children raised by Ann Campbell. Growing up with ten other siblings it is not hard to imagine that Earl Campbell rose from humble beginnings. Before arriving at The University of Texas at Austin, he had never really left the outskirts of Tyler, Texas and especially not East Texas. He arrived at college with one pair of jeans, a couple shirts, a hand made suit sewn by his high school sweetheart, who would later become his wife, and forty dollars. However, with determination and a strong work ethic he would leave The University of Texas at Austin far different than how he came (Heisman.com).

During his freshman year at The University of Texas at Austin in 1974, he rushed for 928 yards and scored six touchdowns as a fullback (Heisman.com). He also received All-South Western Conference (SWC) honors that year and received the same honors two seasons after. As a sophomore, he rushed for 1,118 yards and 13 touchdowns receiving an All-American award at the end of the season (Heisman.com). That year UT went 10-2 and was ranked sixth nationally

in the Associated Press Poll at year's end. In the 1976 season Campbell missed four games due to a hamstring injury and the Longhorns finished the season 5-5 (Heisman.com). Campbell played through injuries most of the season and had a low of 653 yards and three touchdowns.

However, his senior year was proven to be when Campbell came back stronger than ever. That season Earl Campbell rushed for 1,744 yards and 19 touchdowns (Heisman.com). He led the nation in both scoring and yards that year. Due to the leadership of Earl Campbell the Longhorns went 11-0 in the regular season and finished fourth nationally in the Associated Press Poll. Earl Campbell finished his career at The University of Texas at Austin with 4,443 yards and 41 touchdowns. He also became the first Longhorn, both Black and White, to win the Heisman Award Trophy in 1977 (Heisman.com). Another important note is that Earl Campbell left The University of Texas at Austin with a degree in hand from what is now known as the Moody College of Communication (Heisman.com).

After his time at UT, it is not surprising that Earl Campbell continued to play football in the National Football League. In the 1978 NFL draft, Earl Campbell was the number one draft pick selected by the Houston Oilers (Profootballhof.com). At the end of his rookie season, Campbell was awarded Rookie of the Year Award, the Most Valuable Player (MVP) and Offensive Player of the Year Award (Profootballhof.com). The following season he won MVP and the Offensive Player of the Year again after rushing 1,697 yards in the 1979 season (Profootballhof.com). In 1980 he rushed for 1,934 yards and gained 200 yards in just four games. In the first six seasons, Earl Campbell advanced to the Pro Bowl five times (Profootballhof.com). Earl Campbell ended his career with the New Orleans Saints before retiring in 1985. In eight seasons, Earl Campbell rushed for 9,407 yards and 74 touchdowns. Earl

Campbell was inducted into the College Hall of Fame in 1990 and the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1991 (Profootballhof.com).

Earl Campbell grew up in a small town in East Texas with ten other siblings raised by a single mother. When he arrived at UT he did not have much, but he was determined to be successful. “I want to make sure my name’s mentioned when they start to call the roll, and I have to work hard to make sure that happens...I have it in my mind that if I work hard, then I shall receive” (Profootballhof.com). This reiterates the belief that hard work turns out favorable and for Earl Campbell this belief became a reality. He was successful on the field in college which allowed him to be successful in the NFL. Campbell was also successful off the field by ensuring he received a bachelor’s degree from The University of Texas. Even after he retired from playing professional football he was positioned to generate success through his own business. He is currently the President of Earl Campbell Meat Products, Incorporated. This company manufactures and sells Earl Campbell’s smoked sausage and other products (Profootballhof.com).

(Ricky Williams)

Errick Lane Williams Jr, affectionately known as Ricky was born on May 21, 1977 in San Diego, California to Errick Sr. and Sandy Williams (Heisman.com). Ricky Williams has a twin sister named Cassie and a younger sister, Nisey. Ricky’s parents divorced when he was 6 years old and life as he knew it changed forever. Ricky felt the responsibility to step up and be the man of the household. Although his mother explained that he was still just a boy, Ricky felt accountable. Growing up Ricky’s mother worked a full time job and enrolled in night school. Ricky took on the job of ensuring his sisters were up and ready for school, locked up the house,

and made dinner in the evenings (Garber, 2003). He helped them with their homework and even taught his younger sister how to read. Williams also waited up every night for his mother to come home. These extra responsibilities at an early age caused Ricky to grow up very quickly. In an interview with Kelly Crouse from the Palm Beach Post, Williams said, "My mom taught me don't expect anything from anyone. That's reality. When people are whining that it's not fair, well, life's not fair. It's not supposed to be. I don't think fair is even a word. It's just an ideal" (Garber, 2003).

The situation changed once again for Ricky, when he revealed to his mother an allegation he had kept secret. In the divorce papers of his parents, Ricky Williams Sr. was accused of inappropriate sexual behavior with his twin children Ricky and Cassie. This led to their mother receiving full custody and visitation would be limited and supervised (Garber, 2003). In 1984 Erick Williams Sr. was placed on the registered sex offender list due to a misdemeanor charge of molesting different children (Garber, 2003). In August 1999, Ricky's father pled guilty to felony theft and served 90 days in jail. In an interview, Sandy Williams said "The counselors said they'd never, ever lead a normal life, that anything that happened would follow them the rest of their lives. My goal in life was to teach them to lead as normal a life as possible" (Garber, 2003, para. 27).

After seeing Ricky's accomplishments in high school, college, and in the NFL from the outside looking in, it seems that Ricky Williams led a normal life after experiencing extensive emotional trauma. He attended Patrick Henry High School in San Diego. During his senior year, Ricky was a running back who ran for 2,099 yards and scored 25 touchdowns (Garber, 2003).

He also played baseball, was a member of the wrestling team, and ran track. His senior year he decided to make The University of Texas at Austin his future home and the rest is history.

Ricky Williams started his freshman year at The University of Texas at Austin as a fullback. He rushed for 990 yards and scored 8 touchdowns and broke Earl Campbell's freshman rushing record (Heisman.com). During his sophomore year Ricky Williams rushed for 1,272 yards and scored 12 touchdowns. By the time he reached his junior year, Ricky Williams was leading the nation and the topic of conversation (Heisman.com). During his junior year, he rushed for 1,893 yards and scored 25 touchdowns (Heisman.com). Just when people thought Ricky Williams had peaked, his senior campaign proved them wrong. Ricky rushed for 2,124 yards and scored 27 touchdowns (Heisman.com). Ricky Williams was the first person to win the Doak Walker Award twice, won the Maxwell and Walter Camp Foundation Player of the Year Awards, and set 21 NCAA records. To top it off, Ricky Williams won the Heisman Trophy Award in 1998 with the greatest percentage of first place votes in Heisman History (Heisman.com).

In the 1999 NFL draft, the New Orleans Saints traded all of their draft picks in 1999 plus the first and third round selections in the 2000 draft to select Ricky Williams fifth in the 1999 draft (NFL.com). This was the first time in NFL history for one person to be the only draft pick for an entire team's draft class (NFL.com). However, Ricky Williams was not happy in New Orleans and was traded to the Miami Dolphins for the 2002 season. He carried the ball 383 times, rushed for 1,853 yards and was selected for the Pro-Bowl that year (NFL.com). Reflecting back on his life, Williams' mother recalls that when Ricky was young he promised to buy his mom a house and a car when he was older. Well, during his time in the NFL he fulfilled

that promise and bought his mother a house in Austin along with two expensive cars. Ricky also paid for his sister to get a Master's Degree and supported his father's new family. Ricky did not only achieve financial security for himself, but for his family as well.

Ricky Williams played 12 seasons in the NFL. He retired once in 2004, returned to the NFL, and retired again in 2012 (NFL.com). He rushed for 10,009 yards and scored 66 touchdowns. Ricky Williams also played one year in the Canadian Football League (NFL.com). Ricky Williams had to overcome adversity during his life. One deterrent that Ricky Williams overcame during his career was the use of cannabis. In an interview he stated, "Back in 2004, I retired to smoke weed. Well, that's not all the way true. I retired to take better care of myself. One of those things that helped was cannabis" (Alvarado, 2018 para. 2). Ricky Williams believes he lost around \$10 million dollars and major endorsements due to his smoking habits (Alvarado, 2018). The amount of pain that comes with playing professional football is undeniable and different players compensate in different ways. Ricky was in pain and smoking weed was one way that he dealt with it even though he lost money and opportunities, as a result. However, he now is using cannabis as a positive avenue for revenue and opportunity.

Ricky Williams along with his wife started a business called Real Wellness (Alvarado, 2018). Real Wellness' main goal is to create healthy products that combine natural medicines and different kinds of cannabis. Ricky believes, "You can have a more direct, more specific, and more powerful effect with the herbs. I think what makes Real Wellness different, especially in the medical marijuana and CBD space, is that we honor that cannabis is a wonderful medicine, but we also realize that if you add other herbals with CBD and THC, you can create a superior

product” (Alvarado, 2018). Ricky understands that cannabis is stigmatized and he wants to encourage people to think of cannabis in a new way.

Ricky Williams is another example of a rags to riches success story. Ricky has endured hardships in his life that no person should ever have to experience. Due to life’s circumstances, Ricky had to grow up a lot earlier than the average child, but he did it. One word to describe Ricky Williams is resilient. No matter what life threw his way, he found a way to keep going. This trait is one reason for his success both on and off the field. Under these circumstances others would have given up, but Ricky Williams found a way to keep going. Although there are many other words to describe his off the field behavior, no one can take away his accomplishments nor his success. Ricky Williams can be viewed as an inspiration for young boys that are in a difficult situation. Ricky did not approach each challenge perfectly or professionally, but he made it work the best way he could.

From a financial standpoint, he not only elevated himself, but also his family. Ricky Williams has the financial security to not only ensure his immediate family is cared for, but his extended family as well. That is truly the end goal for many Black boy’s in today’s society. Although making it to the NFL is one goal, I believe financial freedom is the main goal. The ability to live a comfortable lifestyle, have all of the basic necessities, and ensure the same for loved ones. This is the reason so many Black athletes are striving for the NFL. These athletes desire to reach back and help the very people that sacrificed, in order to ensure their success today. Although this could be achieved through several avenues, Black boys view sports as the most obtainable path for success. This mindset has been ingrained into many of their minds and causes them to form a narrow view of reality. Framing scholars argue that news media “frame”

an audience's interpretation of events, people, or ideas (Goffman, 1974), in particular by "selecting" specific elements and ignoring others (Gitlin, 1980). The success of Earl Campbell and Ricky Williams are prime examples of the rags to riches myth. The appearance of success is not a true reflection of the reality of struggles along the way to financial wealth.

Former NFL player Vince Young grew up in a low-income community in Houston, Texas. He too faced adversities and utilized football as his means of escape. He attended The University of Texas at Austin on scholarship and became the team's star quarterback. Vince Young led the Longhorns to a national championship at the 2006 Rose Bowl. Young too was faced with a decision on whether to complete his senior year to continue his winning streak, or leave college early to join the NFL. He sought advice from his head coach, the legendary Mack Brown for a decision that changed the course of his career. Mack Brown was a father-figure to Young, whose real father was incarcerated. It is football coaches like the legendary Mack Brown that can influence the attainment of upward mobility of student-athletes.

As the head coach of the Texas Longhorns for 16 seasons, Mack Brown led student-athletes to success on-the-field and off-the-field. Several athletes from The University of Texas at Austin were drafted to the NFL under the leadership of Coach Brown. Mike Williams, Quentin Jammer, and Aaron Ross to name a few. During Brown's head coach tenure at UT there were 71 student-athletes selected in the draft. Mack Brown also expected high academic achievement and community service. While at UT more than a third of the student-athletes earned 3.0 grade point averages and recognition on the Big 12 Commissioner's and Athletics Director's honor rolls. Brown also ensured that student-athletes were equipped for life after sports by hosting life skills seminars.

Analysis

After exploring the rags to riches myth and upward mobility in the Black community, I believe that although the NFL can be a successful path to financial freedom, educational avenues should be explored to ensure financial stability for the distant future. The NFL is a great goal for any athlete to have, but the goal should come with the understanding that even if the athlete does play in the NFL, education will ensure the achievement of upward mobility for themselves and their families. One way athletes can improve their chances at financial stability is by obtaining a degree from a four year university. Athletes have the unique opportunity of attending college for free. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity that should not be taken for granted. Even though athletes have the option to return to school there are now expenses for tuition, books, and other living costs that were not the athlete's responsibility during the first college attendance. There should be a bigger push from the athletic department and the NCAA to ensure athletes receive the education deserved. Players should not fail after their collegiate sports career because their academic curriculum was ignored.

Some may argue that the benefits of leaving college to enter the draft outweigh the benefits of staying an extra year to receive a degree. The future is unpredictable and if a player had a great season, some believe that the draft should be entered while the iron is hot. While this is true, athletes should consider long-term futures rather than short-term goals. The athlete that stayed an extra year to get their degree will likely be more stable in ten years than the athlete that decided to enter the draft and leave school without a degree. A college degree grants additional

opportunities and flexibility for a lifetime. A degree opens doors to financial security and will ensure an athlete is marketable long after retirement.

Athletes should be required to take financial literacy classes during their time in college to ensure they are equipped to handle their money responsibly. One of the biggest takeaways from the “rags to riches” story, is that a lot of athletes do not understand the importance of saving their money. It is understandable that a young athlete will splurge once the NFL level is reached, but the immediate purchase of expensive cars or million dollar homes is excessive.

Young professional athletes should stick to a budget, even if a million dollar contract was signed. If an athlete saves their money early, security will be present later. The amount of money an athlete makes while playing in the NFL will be less upon retirement, therefore it is crucial to save during the football career. Football is an unpredictable sport and assets can be gone in an instant. Athletes need to ensure that the accustomed lifestyle can be maintained long after football. Financial literacy classes are vital to ensure an understanding of how to accomplish this.

There also needs to be a bigger emphasis on the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, where Blacks are underrepresented relative to their presence in the overall United States workforce (Pew Research Center, para. 1). One reason that the rags to riches myth is so celebrated, is because it is highlighted in the media and by powerful influencers. If the STEM field was as celebrated by the media as sports, more impressionable children would take an interest in the different subjects. The STEM field is a secure way to achieve financial freedom that can be overlooked, because it is not as glamorous or enforced. If parents and coaches glorify being an engineer on the same pedestal as playing in the NFL, more children would see

engineering or math as a viable path for success. There needs to be a shift in the narrative that is being pushed in the Black community. Sports has been seen as a source for upward mobility for black men in the black community, but it is not the only way. Young black boys need to be taught that there are other avenues that will provide a better life for themselves and their families.

The two paths are also not mutually exclusive. An athlete can be a star and a scholar in the classroom. An athlete can be the best player on the field and have a 4.0 grade point average. An athlete can play in the NFL and after retirement attend medical school, to become a doctor as a second career, but it all starts with the ideas that are being instilled at a young age. An athlete would be more susceptible to staying at school to finish their college degree before entering the NFL draft, if as a child there was a clear understanding of the value of a quality education and how it can help them achieve athletic goals. It all starts with what children are being taught. The ideals instilled at a young age remain with a person throughout their lives, whether it is good or bad. If Black boys are taught to achieve their goal of playing professional football and run a successful business simultaneously with the proper education, their financial future will be much brighter.

Along with parents and youth coaches preaching the importance of education to athletes, the message should continue to be pushed when an athlete reaches college. Upon entering college student-athletes should have a gameplan for both on the field and off the field. If an athlete has a goal of playing in the NFL, tutors should be engaged early to ensure graduation with a bachelor's degree in 3 years or in 3.5 years. Most athletes are already on campus over the summer due to practice or strength training, so staff should plan for meaningful courses over the

summer that will help them with their degree requirements. Graduating early will give an athlete the flexibility to enter the draft after three years or to train for the NFL Combine in the spring after their senior season. Universities should already have programs established for their athletes, because of the awareness that many of them want to play in the NFL.

Overall, I do not believe that solely playing in the NFL is enough to achieve and maintain upward mobility for Black men in America. The rags to riches myth perpetuates a false sense of security and leads some to believe that the NFL or other professional leagues are a way to obtain financial security and freedom. While the NFL can grant financial success for some time, it will not sustain a person for their entire lives. Education is necessary for the chance at a true financial well-being and for a family to achieve upward mobility. The NFL can attribute to financial elevation, but it cannot be the only source a person relies on for the financial future.

The research of the portrayal of the Black athlete's rags to riches myth in the media and the media's upward mobility influences of young Black children in America confirms that rags to riches stories depicted in the media are viewed by underserved communities as a ticket to financial freedom. The results prove the disproportionate attention devoted to coverage of a Black athletes' adversity and hardship to become successful rather than talent and educational accomplishments. This framing provides a context within the Black community that positive stories of an athlete who attained upward mobility with other avenues does not exist. The media plays a major role in audiences responses based on inclusion or exclusion of information (Entman, 1993).

When the media uses framing for race-related messages the potential to misled young Black boys and provide a social identity advantage to Whites is likely. The rags to riches myth

is an ideology that deserves to be celebrated. The athletes that have obtained financial freedom through professional sports are talented men that have dedicated their entire lives to their sport. Athletes have sacrificed and worked hard in order to achieve their goals and their dedication is a success everyone can learn from.

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