

Using the Master's Tools: Resisting Colonization through Colonial Sports

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This ethnographic research analyzes the relationship between colonial sports and traditional Navajo culture. It finds that while the Navajo have fully ingrained colonial sports into their culture, they have not necessarily adopted the colonial meanings of individualism and dominance associated with those sports. Sports like basketball and baseball are shown to provide the Navajo with recreation and entertainment; but most significantly, they seem to provide the opportunity to compete directly against Euro-Americans in an ostensibly equal arena. By occasionally beating white teams at their own game, this research shows that colonial sports are actually used as a form of resistance against colonial culture. Still, this research shows that standout athletes find themselves caught between a sport that promotes superstardom and a culture that rejects it, a social location that is difficult for these athletes to navigate.

It's Friday night, three hours before tip-off. Basketball fans have been lined outside the gymnasium for several hours to see a highly anticipated match between two women's basketball teams. As the gymnasium swells with spectators conversations can be heard in multiple languages. Although the arena holds thousands, the seats fill, and many disappointed fans are turned away. When the competing teams are introduced, the fans stand and cheer with an energy reminiscent of the opening of a NCAA championship match. Yet, this is not a collegiate or professional match. These fans come from a rather remote region of the American Southwest in order to watch two high school teams compete. While they compete team to team, they also compete nation to nation. This is a match between two cultures, each using basketball as a tool to achieve cultural objectives. Both use the sport as a tool of solidarity, but there are some very important differences in the way they use basketball, and the meaning basketball has to their cultures, as well. It is these differences that this paper examines.

The Navajo are among the most studied cultures on the globe, as the ease of access has drawn many anthropologists to explore most aspects of Navajo society.¹ Highlighting the intensity of these investigations, between 1928 and 1966 one study found 258 separate anthropological publications on the Navajo.² Yet, despite this accumulation of literature, there has been a dearth of investigations into the specific relationship between the Navajo and European athletic culture, just as there has been a shortage of investigations into athletic cultures among other native cultures in the United States.³ Furthermore, when Anglo's have examined the relationship between sport and native cultures, there has been a tendency to universalize all native cultures as one, similar to the manner in which Said has shown Euro-Americans have lumped various Asian cultures together.⁴ The lack of empirical investigation into the relationship between the Navajo and colonial sports is a particularly blaring omission in the literature, because it may contain rich information into the relationship not only between the Navajo and sport, but also between the Navajo and their colonizers.

This research examines that relationship. It questions how the Navajo, who are reported to maintain a collectivist orientation to social life, government, *and* sports, navigate the individualistic outcomes that are structured aspects of colonial team sports.⁵ In other words, it examines how the Navajo deal with sports that necessarily single out one athlete as the highest point scorer, or a group of players as starters. It shows how the Navajo use the in-group/out-group process of team's and competition to raise solidarity among the Navajo, but suggests that this comes at a cost, as traditional Navajo culture is opposed to the structure and embedded meanings of much of the operation of colonial sports. Still, this research shows that Navajo use colonial sports (primarily basketball and football) in attempt to beat white culture at their own game, effectively assimilating to these sports while simultaneously resisting them. Essentially, this research suggests that the Navajo use the tools of the master as a form of resistance and maintenance against him. In some aspects, basketball and

football are played not because the Navajo have succumbed to assimilationist efforts, but because it serves a covert tool to resist those efforts.

Background

While the fact that Navajo (and other native cultures) play basketball and football may not seem odd today, the Navajo's reverence for basketball and football is worthy of investigation because these sports were levied upon the Navajo as part of assimilationist efforts into colonial culture. It is not so much the structure of these sports that is of interest, rather the meanings of dominance embedded in the culture of those sports, and the individualism that is produced as a product of its structure (i.e. someone is bound to score the most points on a team). Fundamental to this research, is the understanding that the Navajo, like many native cultures, are reported to maintain a collectivist orientation to social life, government, and sport. An orientation that is opposed to the elevation of individuals over the whole.⁶

Assimilation of the Navajo became a long-range federal policy under the terms of an 1868 treaty negotiation with the U.S. government.⁷ Ostensibly, the purpose was to assimilate the Navajo into the dominant Anglo-Protestant society, something primarily accomplished through the socialization of Navajo youth into American culture via public education. To accomplish this, Christian denominations were encouraged to open schools on the reservation, and in many cases, Navajo children were often taken to boarding houses against their parents wills.

With these schools came the structure and culture of colonial sports. Sports such as football, basketball, baseball, and boxing were thought to produce qualities desirable to the colonizers, in that they represent masculinized territorialization through struggle and triumph against others.⁸ Furthermore, the structure of these sports produced a group of winners and a group of losers, something equated to masculine worth embedded within the context of these struggles.⁹ This masculinist and hierarchical jockeying for individual and team supremacy is something associated with western sports, and was not found among most indigenous athletic events which were predicated in bringing unity to all.¹⁰

Sport has a long history in Native cultures.¹¹ But rather than competing against one-another, most indigenous games were structured in relation to a traditionally based collectivist orientation toward social matters. The structure of sports centered on the obtainment of parity of outcome, which symbolically equated victory for all.¹² Rather than sports being played in order to symbolize territorial dominance and masculinist hierarchical achievement, sports like the traditional sports of running, archery, swimming, lacrosse, and other non-commercialized games were a way of seeking blessings from a higher spirit; while sports that more closely resemble what we call team sports, were played in order to unite clans and tribes. These games were also used in reproducing native culture and tribe identity as they transmitted religious and cultural understandings from one generation to the next.

Conversely, colonial sports, reflect capitalism, western expansionism and conflict among opposing groups. Clearly then, colonial sports had both structural and cultural differences in the use and understanding of sport, but native athletics today are also said to value a collective orientation to task management, even in sports that require starters and bench warmers.¹³

Because of these structural and cultural differences, one can assume that the relationship between the Navajo and colonial sport was, at first, highly tenuous. Navajo youth were forced to play a game that was used to not only divide group against group, but also one whose structure necessarily produced individual standouts. Still, there were many good (mostly political) reasons for native cultures to adopt colonial sports. These reasons include the fact that they served a unifying theme throughout the over 500 recognized tribes in North America; as baseball, basketball, and football were played the same way in all cultures.¹⁴ In this aspect, Bloom suggests that, ironically, where colonial sports were designed to erase Native memory, they may also have, ‘...ended up being a source of pride for students and their children, a resource for pleasure, and an instrument through which they creatively constituted and reformulated their identities.’¹⁵ Some indigenous athletes have

even excelled in Euro-American sporting leagues or institutions, and indigenous groups have also formed their own sporting venues that utilized colonial sports since then.¹⁶ In other words, Bloom suggests that native cultures may have undermined the meanings associated with the structure of colonial sports, and by the turn of the 20th century, native cultures began widely adopting these Euro-American games because they served some valued purpose.¹⁷

At one level, the wide adoption of colonial sports makes it seem that the assimilationist effort of the colonists has worked, and to some degree, this may be true. For example, baseball, basketball and football can be found on every reservation, and in many cases (as with the Navajo), basketball is the most popular sport played. These sports do pit Navajo team vs. Navajo team. However, the issue is more complex than it first appears. Just because the Navajo use the structure of basketball, does not necessarily mean that they have also adopted colonial meanings associated with those sports. If, for example, the structure of colonial sports was adopted as a way to organize and resist colonial assimilationist attempts, than the celebration of and reverence for Jim Thorpe, for example, may be seen not only because he was an outstanding athlete, but because he was an outstanding Native American beating European-Americans at their own game. In other words, the celebration of colonial sports among native athletes does not necessarily mean that they subscribe to the colonial underpinnings of those sports.

Methods

This qualitative research analyzes the relationship between Navajo culture and colonial sports from an institutional and interactional perspective. I went into the setting in order to analyze the relationship between dominant meanings associated with colonial sports and the agency of human actors in the social construction of both individual and cultural identities.¹⁸ I first oriented myself to

Navajo culture through the reading of (mostly anthropological) literature, and through informal discussions with a Navajo friend who was raised on the reservation.

Jon had obtained a modest degree of what he describes as 'respect' as a Navajo athlete, and had recently left the reservation in order to attend college. I used him as a key informant for acquiring interviews with athletes, coaches and parents, and for providing me with entrance into the athletic world during the ethnographic portion of the research. He also served as a guide in the coding and interpretation of the data.

I began this research with 18 in-depth telephoned interviews of current high school athletes from two separate high schools located on the Navajo reservation. Nine of these athletes represented players from women's basketball teams and nine from men's. These (60-120 minute interviews) focused on: 1) how these athletes were socialized into sports; 2) what their experience has been in sport; 3) how they perceive their athletic athleticism and athletic accomplishments to be received by their peers, family and community; 4) what their views were regarding individual versus a collective orientation toward playing these sports; and 5) what their athletic and life aspirations were post high school.

After transcribing and coding these interviews in 2001, I focused on several emergent themes to investigate in the ethnographic component of this research a year later. Jon used his insider's network to set up several daily interviews with coaches, parents and school administrators for me, and served as a translator when required. I conducted a total of 32 interviews in the field. In addition to these interviews, I conducted participant observation on four selected high school basketball teams (2 men's and 2 women's) from two separate schools, as well as one (co-ed) cross country team. These teams were solicited in advance through my key informant, each agreed to allow me to participate in their practices, to attend their matches, and many of the athletes invited me to associate with them away from the team as well.

My acceptance into the athletes' world was made possible because I was not only presented 'as a good friend' of the key informant, but because I was also willing to partake in their sport (sometimes doing okay at it too) and to socialize with the athletes away from practice. Moreover, my experiences as a coach and knowledge of kinesiology and sport psychology enabled me to speak much of their athletic language and to help them with their athletic endeavors. It should also be noted that there are a great many outsiders who visit the Navajo reservation, so my presence as a white male was not out of place. I also relied on the informants for telephoned conversations after my visit, in order to clarify or discuss new issues with them. For those who did not have a telephone, I used e-mail to communicate with them, as all had access to the Internet at their schools.

The Only Show in Town

The infertile red soil of Navajo country is occasionally broken by the splattering of striking red-rock formations and small towns that are usually separated by more than fifty miles. These towns are not marked by tall buildings, impressive bridges or highways. They are as rural as any American towns I have seen, and most are without the luxuries of modern capitalist societies, like telephones, power, or plumbing. Jon and I entered his hometown and I was struck by an unusual road sign. I asked, 'Is that common?' pointing to the sign. The sign was old, fairly faded, and looked homemade. It read, 'Volleyball champions 1987.' Jon responded, 'Oh yeah,' as he smiled, 'I told you sports were a big deal here.' Along the road, another sign boasted of a basketball championship team.

Desiring to impress me with his town's athletic facilities, Jon drove me past the hard dirt lot of the baseball team, and the six lane rubber running track (a standard track has nine). He pointed, with pride, 'And that's our gym.' Although there are no tennis courts or swimming pools, the existence of *this* basketball stadium indicates the reverence this town maintains toward basketball. To my urban sensibilities, the stadium lacked reason to boast. In comparison to other buildings on

the reservation, however it was second only to the community college and select houses of Christian or Mormon worship. The pride it brought to Jon was noteworthy.

Later that day, I examined *The Navajo Nation* newspaper. I was struck by the lack of community events, arts, and entertainment, and I was equally awed by the reverence for which the paper discussed sports. Not sports the way the *Los Angeles* or *New York Times* would cover sports. This paper's sport section did not carry news of the major leagues; the ink in this paper was devoted solely to high school sports. 'I can't believe how much space is devoted to high school sports,' I expressed to Jon. 'Yeah, check this out.' Jon retrieved a scrap book with clippings of his athletic career on the reservation. 'In case you couldn't tell, there isn't much happening around here. Sports are really it. They are all we have around here. I mean we have our annual pow-wow . . . but in terms of regular stuff, it's *all* about sports.' I asked, 'All sports? I mean do they get a ton of people to say a cross country meet?' 'No. Not really,' he responded. 'It's mostly basketball and football. I mean they will talk about other sports, and the newspaper talks about them, but it's basketball that everyone goes to watch out here.'

It is not just sports, in the general sense, that draw the attention of the community; it is specifically high school sports. There are *no* professional sporting teams on the 27,000 square mile reservation, and the only community college on the reservation does not offer athletics (there would be no other teams against which to compete). With no major leagues, minor leagues, community leagues, or university or junior college sports to watch, the fan base for athletics concentrates around one level—high school—and there is no sport more popular on the Navajo reservation than basketball.

A reverence for high school basketball is not unusual in North American culture. High school sports have been shown to serve a unifying purpose for small communities throughout the United States, where attention usually centers on men's contact team sports.¹⁹ But the towns I visited

on the reservation are like no other small American towns that I have been to, and the difference leads me to suspect that sports carry extra significance to the Navajo. One of the most notable differences between this and other American towns is that on the Navajo reservation, poverty is *everywhere*. There are no mega-shopping complexes, no music halls, museums, or concert halls, so there are few places for the community to gather, or reasons for a gathering. There is a weekend swapmeet, but there seems to be little draw for town-folk to drive from the outskirts of their town (often 35 to 50 miles out) than perhaps the Wal Mart 50 miles outside of town (and off the reservation). It is clear that sports serve as a reason for the community to gather.

Unlike other American towns, where people might just bump into each other on the streets or in the stores, or where people gather for weekly church services, large swap meets, concerts, performing arts, or simply to recreate in lush parks, lakes or beaches, the population of Jon's town is sparse, and there just isn't any of these things to do or places to go. There is *plenty* of land to do things on (wild horses roam free), but the land is relatively barren and people are spread out. In fact, the high school in Jon's town only meets four days a week because some kids spend a lot of time traveling to school. I talked to one athlete who wakes up at 5:00 AM so that he can leave his home at 5:30 and walk an hour and a half to where the bus picks him up and drives him an hour to school.

While driving to an athlete's home Jon pointed to a post alongside the road, it had a number inscribed on it. 'People are so spread out here,' he said, 'and lots of people don't have neighbors, and most don't have phones, so the numbers are for the police to come by and check up on people,' he told me. 'So do sports give people a reason to gather? Are they a draw for the community to come together and socialize?' I asked. Jon smiled, 'Wait until tomorrow. You'll see.'

When driving through the reservation, one notices that almost every house, hogan, or mobile home has a makeshift basketball hoop. Few of the hoops are of regulation height, and none of them stand with concrete beneath (kids bounce the ball on dirt), but the sheer number of basketball hoops

on the reservation signifies the importance of this sport in Navajo society. But one might wonder why a sport like basketball has become so immensely popular when other sports, like running, historically have deep spiritual meaning and cultural significance to the Navajo.²⁰ A track coach told me that the community no longer esteemed running as it used to, ‘Nobody wants to run anymore. Everybody wants to be a big basketball or football star.’ It seems that the Navajo have shifted their emphasis away from certain sports (or cultural activities) and centered them primarily on basketball and football. There are, of course, both historical and structural reasons for the immense popularity of basketball on the reservation, but more importantly, one might wonder if the valuing of these sports has influenced their larger traditional Navajo values. Oswalt & Neely have shown that while the Navajo have assimilated Christianity into their belief system, it has not fundamentally altered their native religion, something consistent with studies of other native cultures.²¹ Thus, for the Navajo, who are reported to be conservative in retaining their culture, devaluing sports such as running and instead emphasizing colonial sports, must certainly mean that they derive something valuable from them.

I asked parents, athletes, coaches and administrators why they thought basketball was such a big deal on the reservation. The answers varied from one athlete’s response, ‘It’s just a fun game,’ to a high school principal’s, ‘Basketball offers an indoor game in which not only are the participants and spectators sheltered from the elements, but in which we can charge admission.’ He added, ‘Basketball also offers a good seat to just about everyone in the arena, and this, combined with the fast-paced action, makes it a cash cow for us.’ An athletic director said, ‘That’s a great question. I never really stopped to ask why basketball and not running or Lacrosse or something. I don’t really know, but I will tell you that you’re right!’ He continued, ‘Basketball is so popular that thousands of people regularly show up to watch. He explained, ‘We start our basketball games at 3:00 in the

afternoon and people begin lining up at 10:00 in the morning to get a seat...we once played in front of 18,000 people. I mean that's more than the Suns play in front of.'

The principal of another high school said,

Thousands and thousands of fans will travel to every basketball or football game we play. It doesn't matter whether it is 30 miles or 300 miles away, they will go. Sport has always been important to these people, and they will travel as far as needed to see their teams play . . . Although basketball is the most popular sport in town, football also attracts large audiences. We can put eight to nine thousand people in our stands, and we fill them. A lot of people are driving *a long* distance to watch these athletic contests.

To appreciate these numbers, one must realize that the high school he speaks of is in a town of just 1,254 residents. When I asked him why high school sports were so popular, he answered, 'Simple, it's the only show in town, there's nothing else to do here.'

Thus, when it comes to the question of whether colonial efforts to popularize colonial sports among the Navajo have been successful or not, the answer is very clearly, yes. Colonial sports are as popular and as important (or more) to the Navajo as they are in the broader U.S. culture. Some of the reasons for this are obvious: basketball is theatrical, requires few breaks, and is high scoring. Basketball is also played indoors, providing spectators both shelter from the elements and a good seat. And for a community lacking in public entertainment, there is no question that basketball games become the gathering locale as they have the unique effect of uniting the community to cheer for their team, town, and people.

When it comes to the question of the *meaning* of these colonial sports, however, and to what degree the Navajo have adopted colonial values of individual competition, masculinization, territorialization and capitalism, things are not so clear. It may have been possible for the Navajo to

adopt the structure of colonial sports, without adopting the function of them. Allison and Lueschen distinguish that there is a difference between the structure of a game, and the function of a game, and highlight this in Navajo basketball:

First, the game contest is a highly variable but patterned phenomenon. The data suggests that not only is there a wide degree of intercultural variability in the content of a game but a high degree of intercultural variability as well. Basketball is not a simple entirety. Rather, it is a complex aggregate of distinguishable units which may be adopted in part or intoto by a cultural group.²²

However, Allison and Lueschen also suggested that there seemed to be a ‘stripping away’ of cultural elaborations in the Navajo sporting culture, and that the culture of the sport may take over and suppress the culture of the people.²³ Similarly, Garrity highlights a discussion with an Anglo (from off the reservation) coach who said that what it means to be a good Hopi contrasts that of what it means to be a good football player.²⁴ When the coach was asked how he handled the situation, he responded that he did exactly what the missionaries tried to do—de-Indianize the Indians. This is something that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar also tried to do in his basketball coaching with the White Mountain Apache, and he (rightfully) ran into great resistance because of it.²⁵ In this aspect, Native American athletes are reported as often having to negotiate their own cultural orientation with naïve teachers and coaches who encourage them to abandon their strategies and encourage them to adopt the cultural ideology of the Anglo.²⁶

In answering the question of what the significance colonial sports maintain to the Navajo, and how that significance might mirror colonial meanings, it is evidently clear that the Navajo have certainly absorbed the ‘us vs. them’ mentality of Euro-American sports. All one needs to do is attend any meet, match or game and listen to the cheering to understand this. Where high school reservation basketball greatly differs, however, is in the understanding that individuals derive from personal

success. Whereas individual efforts and super-stardom are unquestionably celebrated and valorized off the reservation, the relationship between Navajo high school standouts and their community is, at best, uneasy. Most interestingly, whereas high school athletes can be elevated to icons within communities off the reservation, they are also elevated in Navajo culture. This, of course, is paradoxical to their culture, which is predicated in the devaluing of individualism and the esteeming of collectivism.

The Paradox of Superstardom

Jon and I walked into the school's hallways between passing periods and students greeted him enthusiastically, 'Hey, it's Jon!' 'What's up Jon?' another asked, 'Scoring high in college?' (Jon didn't make his collegiate team). Other students nodded in recognition of the status he maintains, and a teacher in a hallway stopped to greet him with a large, welcoming smile. 'Seems your quit the star here?' I asked. 'I had friends,' he replied modestly, as we entered the principal's office for his interview.

The principal (raised off the reservation) seemed sure of his understanding of the use of sport among the Navajo, 'The kids play sports because of two reasons,' he said. 'Either they like it and are good at it, or because it brings them recognition. The younger kids look up to them...you know our kids probably sign as many autographs as some pro-players do.' The principal then recounted *his* glory days of coaching; easily recalling the names of the athletes that helped him achieve *his* successes so many years ago. The interaction, of course, made me question whether this was why he thought the Navajo played colonial sports, or whether this was why he coached colonial sports. Later in the afternoon, I was sitting with a parent of a Navajo runner having lunch, 'See that guy over there?' he asked. 'He was part of the district championship team in 1977.' I questioned, 'It seems to

me that athletes on the reservation rank second in name recognition only to the Chief.’ He replied in jest, ‘Yeah, but they are liked better.’

None of this fanfare over superstars is unusual. After all, the nature of many sports is that competition produces championship teams and individual standouts. For example, only five can play on the court in basketball, so a hierarchy is developed immediately depending on who plays and who sits on the bench. What makes this interesting on the reservation however, is that the Navajo have historically been opposed to individualism. They have been reported as rejecting the aggressive, dictatorial postures that dominate Euro-American coaching. Blanchard, for example, reports that the Navajo prefer a democratic style of coaching in which the team is talked about, praised or punished, but the individual is not.²⁷

The Navajo, like many native cultures, are described as placing strong emphasis on unity and group consensus. Thus, their leadership style is decentralized and they tend to negotiate social issues by agreement and consent. The idea of celebrating an individual goes against the collectivist cultural ideology found among many native people. Yet, in addition to the structure of team sports leading to the praising and chastising of whole teams, the point scoring and strategies of play also create athletes who stand out among their peers. These standouts then become the subject of school, community and media attention. Because of this social recognition, they find themselves in a precarious social location, as this is an objectionable practice. It is, for example, this same objection to dictatorship that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar encountered when he temporarily coached high school basketball among the White Mountain Apache in Arizona. He wrote, ‘Apache prefer to blend in with one another rather than stand out on their own.’²⁸ Allison and Lueschen have previously shown this among the Navajo too.

In the Navajo basketball system the movement of an athlete toward a ‘star’ status immediately sets off a chain of status leveling devices by teammates and members of

the larger social milieu, such as ignoring or ostracizing the ‘star.’ In two more severe cases, witchcraft was said to have been practiced by relatives by two athletes because their behavior violated the principal: to be highly skilled is one matter; to flaunt that skill and expect public recognition is another.’²⁹

When I interviewed standout athletes about what it was like being in the center of attention, they upheld this precarious position by seeming uncomfortable with their status. Recall how Jon would not say, ‘Yeah I was popular’ after our trip through the hallway. Rather, he responded with a more modest, ‘I had friends.’ Similarly, a football quarterback told me that he enjoys some aspects of being well-recognized (mentioning the attention he received from women) but that it was also ‘...kind of cheap in a way. I mean there are a lot of people who dislike you because they think you’re better than they are. And I’m not any different, so I try not to talk about it among my friends.’ Another standout athlete told me, ‘I try not to make too much of it, and sometimes it makes me real uncomfortable when people treat me as if I’m any different than anybody else.’ She added, ‘I’m just one of the team.’

Resistance to the star status of these athletes can also be found in athletes of lesser celebrated sports. Another star basketball player referred to a rift between basketball players and minor sport athletes, ‘They don’t like us a whole lot,’ he said. ‘They think we’re too good for them.’ Indeed, the wrestlers and runners I talked to resented the attention given to basketball and football players. Even the elite wrestlers and runners reported that they receive very little attention from their school or community. This, of course, is not necessarily different from the rift between popular and less popular sports off the reservation, but the discord seemed elevated among the minor sport athletes that I talked with. One distance runner said, ‘It’s not that he’s a basketball player that bothers me, I have friends who are on the team. It’s just that he thinks he’s the best, and that’s not right.’

Similar to the manner in which Allyson and Lueschen found status leveling through what they call ‘witchcraft,’ I also found status leveling in operation through the practice of a medicine man. I attended an annual check up with a standout athlete. The performing medicine man discussed the boy’s athletic success with his mother (in Navajo) and, after using crystals to examine the boy’s body, found that, as a reaction of the jealousy of others, small deer-bones had emerged within the body of the young athlete (something Allison and Lueschen might call witchcraft). The bones were said to be causing illness and needed removal. Using an arrowhead, the medicine man surgically removed the three pea-sized bones buried beneath the boys skins (which brought the boy to tears) and deposited them into a stone bowl where he then performed ceremonial chants and practices over them. After the procedure, the Medicine Man instructed him not to make too much of his accomplishments in the future.

In this example, the ‘stripping away’ that Allison and Leuschen described twenty-five years earlier has not been born out. Coaching styles have also remained unchanged to the collectivist manner in which Blanchard described in the 70’s and 80’s.³⁰ I asked every athlete interviewed questions designed to get out how the coach motivates or punishes individuals, and all reported that it would be highly unusual for a coach to single out the individual (although some suggested that they once had a white coach who did just that). And when asked directly, all said that their coach rarely points a kid out for praise or punishment—that the coach most always refers to the team as a whole. This was also consistent with my observations. In this aspect, the Navajo have clearly resisted some of the meanings of dominance that come with colonial sports, even though this resistance places young athletes in a paradoxical situation.

Under this model, one might expect that the more attention an individual gains, the more he or she might be resisted by the community. Matters were not this simple however. It seems that a mild degree of individual recognition is viewed with disdain, but that if the athlete accrues a great

deal of praise he or she is celebrated. For example, one of the highest honors bestowed upon an individual athlete is the offering of an athletic scholarship. I saw no status leveling around this issue. Instead, I saw a strong community-wide emphasis placed on the obtainment of such. It seems that if Navajo athletes can gain positive attention outside the reservation, it is thought to reflect well upon the Navajo in general. Thus, a form of celebrity is upheld for those who earn a college scholarship.

The individual's earning of an athletic scholarship was widely esteemed by coaches, teachers, and administrators. At one high school several people (coaches, administrators and students) told me with great excitement about the scholarship that one athlete had earned. I spoke with that athlete in the presence of his friends, 'I hear you got a full scholarship to play ball?' 'Yeah,' he said. '...well, not full anyhow. They keep writing me and they want me to play for them. But the only thing is that they are saying I'd make the team, but they'd only give me half a scholarship. I'd have to pay the other half. And that's a lot of money for [names school], you know.'

Many of the school's students, teachers, and administrators knew about this young man and his acceptance on scholarship to this particular college. Several people had told me that I should talk to him because of it. But later, in a private conversation, he informed me that not only was he not offered scholarship money, but also that he was *not* admitted to the school at all. He was denied. He informed me that he was planning to attend a community college off the reservation after graduating high school. A rumor had begun that he was accepted to this four-year university, and when I asked him why he had not told others the truth, he replied, 'If they think I've made it, it brings them pride. I'll be off the reservation anyhow, so it isn't that big a deal.'

In this aspect, one can see how the community-wide emphasis on athletic scholarships may be permitted despite the fact that it signals an individual's accomplishment. Because it is seen as credit or recognition from outside the reservation, it serves a symbol of Navajo efficacy. In this aspect, individualism and the praising of an individual, seems to be viewed with disdain when it is

limited to the reservation, but when an individual gains attention from those outside the reservation, it is viewed from an entirely different perspective: giving Navajo athletes a complex social arena in which to navigate.

The situation seems a compromise between traditional Navajo values of consensus and the utility of an individual for Navajo pride. But this compromise is made because life outside the reservation may hold hope for a better life for the Navajo individual, and there is hope that this individual may make life for the Navajo as a whole better. There is lots of talk about ‘making it’ outside the reservation and then ‘returning’ to help the Navajo Nation. In this aspect, super-stardom is viewed as a positive vessel. Unfortunately, the obtainment of a college scholarship is perhaps more difficult on the reservation than off.

Hoop Dreams

Sports have previously been criticized for providing kids with false hope of earning an athletic scholarship. Eitzen says:

Typically, Americans believe that sport is a path to upward social mobility. This belief is based on the obvious examples we see as poor boys and men (rarely girls and women) from rural and urban areas, whether white or black, sometimes skyrocket to fame and fortune through success in sports. Sometimes the financial reward has been staggering.... But while the possibility of staggering wealth and status through sport is possible, the reality is that dramatic upward mobility through sport is highly improbable.³¹

This overemphasis on sport reproduces the existing class structure in America, and I argue it helps reproduce Navajo poverty as well. In neo-Marxist theory, sports, like capitalism, give the illusion that all is fair, that the playing field is the great leveler—a true meritocracy. However, not all is equal

in sports, and sports are the farthest thing from a meritocracy. Sports discriminate against biological phenotypes and there is much institutional racism in sport.³² But for the impoverished, sport often *seems* to be one of the few vehicles out of poverty. And for those who are not as academically inclined, or for those who have never applied the same rigor of sport to their academics, athletics can seem *the only way* out.

The myth that sports are a meritocracy, that one can readily earn an athletic scholarship if he/she works hard enough, appeals to these young Navajo athletes. In fact, almost every high school athlete I talked with shared with me that he or she thought a college scholarship was obtainable. The illusion of success is made by the fact that some athletes have succeed in obtaining a college scholarship. Coaches, teachers, and parents further this widespread belief. For example, I was talking with a freshman basketball player, and I asked him what he planned on doing after high school. He said, 'I'd like to play ball for one of those big universities if I can earn a scholarship. You know, I'd like to play for Duke or North Carolina, or somewhere like that.' He then turned to his coach and said, 'If I'm good enough to make it?' His coach responded, 'Just keep working hard.' Although the coach is certainly correct in asserting that hard work is part of the equation to the type of performance that will be necessary to earn a college scholarship, height is another. The kid in question was approximately 5'5.'

It is ironic that the Navajo value football and basketball the most, because, unlike wrestling or running, they are at a somatic disadvantage in these sports. Some coaches recognize this, 'The game of basketball has little need for a 5'7' forward and football has little need for a 160 pound lineman,' one Navajo coach said. But others stress upon me how college scholarships are vital for their athletes, 'These kids need these scholarships. They need to succeed off the reservation and then return to help their community.'

Another disadvantage comes in the nature of Navajo facilities. Most of the kids play on dirt lots before entering high school; conversely, children in the inner-cities grow up playing on blacktop, a surface closer to the paraffin courts found in high school gymnasiums. Paradoxically, another disadvantage relates to the abundance of hoops available to them on the reservation. Navajo children can always find a (dirt) court to play on, and while it is nice to have a hoop to practice on, the relative abundance might also hurt them. Fewer courts (as is found in the inner cities) increases competition to play on them, and that increases the intensity of the game.

Further increasing the difficulty of a gaining an athletic scholarship is the fact that universities are increasingly hesitant to give full-scholarships. Athletic departments often find they can make better use of their money by offering students partial scholarships so that they might recruit twice the number of athletes.³³ There may also be discrimination against Native athletes on the part of college coaches, whom may believe that native athletes are more likely to drop out of school than white athletes. ESPN highlights this in a special on Native athletes, in which one college coach says she did not give her native athlete a full scholarship because of the perceived higher probability of her returning to the reservation.³⁴ Finally, gaining college scholarships is made difficult by the lack of visibility Navajo athletes maintain to collegiate programs. One reservation coach told me, ‘No. We don’t get a lot of recruiters out here. Most of them would have no idea where the reservation was.’

These factors most certainly challenge the already dim chances a high school ball player has of earning a college scholarship. And there can be no doubt that the coaches and athletes are aware of the extreme difficulty Navajo athletes’ face in terms of earning a college scholarship as they have very few examples of those who have. But despite these low numbers, athletes, and the community, retain the myth of a plausible athletic scholarship. Therefore, there must be something else the Navajo gain from athletic success, something desirable enough to encourage athletes to pursue athletic scholarships, despite the fact that the community resists other forms of individualism, and

despite the fact that the odds of earning such a scholarship are overwhelmingly against them. I posit that such reason comes in the manner in which success in colonial athletics serves as a form of resistance against assimilation, and reproduces Navajo pride.

Structure and Agency

Societies employ ritual to transmit the symbolic codes of the dominant culture to insure the reproduction of that culture and to secure the position of the ruling class.³⁵ Sport serves as a significant means by which a state can socialize its citizens into common norms and values while boosting pride in the nation by providing citizens with common displays of patriotism. Sport, then, becomes a site for rituals that are reproduced from one generation to the next.

High school sports have been shown to bring pride to small towns or impoverished communities throughout America. Miracle & Rees say, 'When the school team wins, the community feels good about itself, even if the economic or social conditions are bleak.'³⁶ Miracle and Rees also report that, in particular, small communities can cherish the dream of receiving recognition and prestige when the local high school team beats a larger more powerful opponent. Coleman has suggested that most communities seldom experience common goals to 'engender a communal spirit and make members feel close to one another by creating collective goals.'³⁷ I maintain that the same occurs with Navajo athletics: that Navajo people take great pride in beating white teams at their own game. Perhaps victory over colonial teams, in colonial sports, is a way of producing Navajo pride because it is a way of saying, 'You are beating me, but you are not dominating me.'

This was made salient in discussions with Navajo athletes when asked of their most memorable moments. I asked many of the athletes to tell me about their most memorable athletic moments, and after telling me details of the game I would ask, 'Was this a white school?' Most of the respondents indicated that it was. One smiled and said, 'Oh. We definitely like to beat white schools.' Another athlete described playing white teams as a unique situation because it is cause for

all the Navajo to cheer on their own. 'Normally the crowd is split into cheering for two Navajo teams. But, when we go somewhere else to play another team, it's like all the Navajo are cheering for us.' I then asked him if it was more exciting to beat another Native American team (such as the Hopi) or a white team. 'Oh, I like to beat white teams the best,' he responded. When I asked, 'how come?' He replied, 'I don't know, it's just more fun. They have all the money and stuff, but we beat them.'

The coaches and athletes do not appear to verbalize their desires to beat white schools specifically to their athletes, but they do express to their athletes the importance of 'representing' the Navajo in order to gain respect for their people. One athlete said, 'When we are out there, we are representing the Navajo Nation as a whole, not just our school. If we look bad, the whole nation looks bad.' The athletes frequently spoke of this, sometimes talking about how if they misbehaved it would make their people look bad, and sometimes about how doing well would make their people proud. One athlete said, 'Our coach keeps telling us how proud our people will be of us, how proud he is of us, I don't like to let him down.'

In this manner, colonial sports, which were designed as a mechanism of cultural assimilation, have also given the Navajo a forum to resist colonization. Competing against white teams is of significance to the Navajo, as attendance at their games suggests. Perhaps the ability to compete against their colonizers, and the possibility of beating them at their own game, has enabled colonial sports to be adopted into Navajo culture and values. This marriage, however, is not perfect; something evident when examining the paradox standout athletes live in as they negotiate their way in a sport that produces stardom in a culture that resists it.

Conclusion

Colonial sports, such as football and basketball, were levied upon Navajo school children as a larger part of their assimilationist efforts into Euro-American culture by missionaries. This was

partially an attempt to erase the history and memory of native people, and partially because it was believed that if natives adopted the structure of colonial sport, they would also adopt the meaning of those sports. To this date, colonial sports have grown to be immensely popular on the Navajo reservation. This research set out to examine the relationship between the Navajo and those sports. Specifically, it examined the most popular sport among the Navajo, basketball. It is noteworthy that this sport is also the most (or one of the most) popular sports off the reservation.

Where one might be likely to view the identification with colonial sports as a sign that the colonialists were successful in using sport as a way to replace Navajo values with colonial values, it is also possible that the immense popularity of Native participation in colonial sports during the late 20th and early 21st centuries signals not assimilation, but a form of resistance to assimilation. In essence, I proposed that, if natives uniformly adopted the structure of colonial sports, without their meanings, they might be able to use colonial sports as a unifying agent among not only their own people, but among natives in general. Essentially, by adopting the structure of Colonial sports, but not their meaning, the Navajo might be tricking the colonists into thinking they have prevailed.

Adopting the structure, but not the meaning, of colonial institutions fits a long Navajo tradition. The Navajo are a people who have incorporated symbols and events of other cultures into their own, without jeopardizing their belief system. The presence of western churches and medicine alongside traditional beliefs serve this example. Since their introduction, colonial sports have become important to the Navajo, even though the ones they value the most (basketball and football) place the Navajo at the greatest disadvantage. While the coordinated efforts among players required for these sports may not seem to contradict traditional Navajo values, the individual superstar status that that they also produce does. Thus, the question of what these sports mean to the Navajo is made salient.

I show that the Navajo use these sports for many of the same practical reasons that make them popular off the reservation; they are fast-paced team sports that also provide a good seat for

many, and that they raise money for schools. The Navajo value these sports because they provide entertainment, give them a purpose to gather, *and* because they are the sports *colonists* value the most.

Ostensibly, it would seem that this signals that the colonists have been fully successful in their assimilationist efforts. However, this research shows that the Navajo have used these sports as a way to unite the Navajo and provide them with the opportunity to play games with other tribes. Perhaps most important, colonial sports provide the Navajo an avenue to compete against the colonists. Success in these sports sends the message, ‘you are beating me, but you are not dominating me,’ in much the same way Richard Majors has shown that African American youth use basketball to send a similar message.³⁸ In this aspect, participation in, and success at basketball and football, enable the Navajo to generate native pride and ultimately serve as a form of covert resistance against colonialism by beating the white man at his own game.

The marriage between colonial sports and the Navajo is, however, not perfect. Navajo athletes report feeling caught between a culture which values collectivism, and a sport that promotes individualism. They appear to negotiate this difference by maintaining a collective orientation to their coaching styles, and only valuing an individual’s athletic accomplishments as long as he or she doesn’t make too much of it. In this manner, the Navajo attempt to gain the most of their relationship with a sport that does not represent their cultural values.

Whereas the obtainment of individual fame on the reservation is met with conflicting sentiment, the obtainment of fame off the reservation, however, is seen as a source of pride generation for the Navajo. Athletes who rise to the top find themselves as an individual representative to the Navajo Nation, someone upon which the people take great pride in. In this aspect, and unlike athletes off the reservation, once top-notch high school athletes do not seem to lose their fame as they age.

Earning a scholarship is taken as a sign of great pride because these scholarships are given by the colonists themselves. As a vessel to escape the poverty of reservation life, however, this strategy appears to be highly ineffectual. High school athletes face the same overwhelming odds that inner-city youths face in obtaining an athletic college scholarship, yet the Navajo have several other disadvantages as well. They do not have the same height as members of other communities and there is an over-abundance of hoops on the reservation. Finally, the inaccessibility, and great distance that the Navajo high schools maintain to metropolitan areas, airports, etc, makes it much more difficult for college recruiters to travel to see them perform.

Thus, sports, for the Navajo appear to be a mixed bag. While their reverence among the Navajo signals a successful assimilationist attempt on part of the colonists, the meanings behind the sports, and the uses of these sports, also promote Navajo solidarity and pride. While the structure of colonial sports necessarily produces individual standouts that stress Navajo acceptability, if these standouts attract enough fame outside the reservation, they stand as a symbol of Navajo capability and community pride. This means that, ironically, athletes stand to gain a great deal of cultural disdain until they make it far enough. This cultural location places Navajo athletes into a difficult situation, ultimately, trapping young Navajo athletes into a false consciousness in which they believe sport to be the ticket off the reservation, and placing them into a culturally complicated arena in which to navigate. Ultimately, the relationship between colonial sports and the Navajo is a complicated one, suggesting colonial desires to rid the Navajo of their identity and belief system has not yet been successful.

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