"SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE": FRACTURED RACE RELATIONS IN THE NBA IN TIMES OF (PERCEIVED) CORPORATE CRISIS

Niklas Thomas
University of Münster

Till Neuhaus
Bielefeld University

ABSTRACT

The The National Basketball Association (NBA) is first and foremost a company which tries to generate revenue. As such, the NBA is embedded into a system of mass media and thereby influenced by cultural, social, and political events. Simultaneously, the NBA can also (partly) cause such events. Lastly, the NBA (and professional basketball at large) has always featured a racial component. Thereby, the NBA features three key American concepts and/or conflicts (corporate interest, meritocracy, race) and, through critical as well as historically-oriented analysis, allows to grasp the interplay of these concepts, at least in a temporally and spatially defined context. This article discusses three individual cases in which the NBA had to react as a race-related image crisis doomed or, in other words: a representative of corporate America had to react to fractures appearing on its otherwise coherent and shiny outside caused by (implicitly or explicitly) racialized aspects. As such, the NBA can be read as a larger extension of American culture and life. In order to understand these three cases as well as the corporate responses in their specific context, the paper will start by providing an overview of professional basketball's history with special consideration of racial aspects. This is followed by the illustration and critical discussion of the three cases and results in a short summary. The overarching focus of the paper is the question of what keeps the NBA—as a company plagued by racial fractures—together at heart. It is assumed that the NBA, as a proto-American sports league, is held together by the same unifying moments which keep America (at least partially) intact and running.
Keywords: Basketball; Corporate narratology; Corporate crisis; Racism; Culturally sensitive marketing.

INTRODUCTION

As the United States is considered the land of freedom and equal opportunity, it often attracts ambitious foreigners, adventurers of all kinds, as well as entrepreneurs. However, the US has also established itself as the land of contradictions with regard to the ideals of opportunity and freedom, at times standing out as "peculiar, even paradoxical" (Kurth 2016, 13) in US society. Such domestic contradictions have been exemplarily verbalized by hip hop artist J Cole in his song "High for Hours" when

he states: "American hypocrisy, oh, let me count the ways they came here seeking freedom then they end up owning slaves" (Spotify 2017). These internal inconsistencies also gain momentum when one widens the viewpoint: the country's proclaimed primacy of meritocracy lacks credibility vis-à-vis the enormous opportunity gap, and the strong focus on the individual and individuality is, at times, contested by an overshadowing nationalism which addresses collective needs. Therefore, it can be argued that "any objective measurement of the American social order will reveal the sad fact that [American] national history is an entire system of contradictions" (Daniels 1976, 3), that actually struggles to keep the great promises it declares to make to everyone—among them freedom, (the pursuit of) happiness, and meritocracy In other words: there are plentiful fractures in the otherwise United States of America. Because the majority of the conflicts taking place on national territory are both historically rooted and have evolved in time, they contribute to shaping present day American politics, media, culture, and other social forms alike. However, these conflicts are barely discussed publicly in their nuance. For this reason, a multitude of critical voices is often required to investigate the apparently harmonious and unperturbed surface of America's (self-)image. From this perspective, movements such as Occupy Wall Street or Black Lives Matter can be understood as powerful gatherings or critical masses that, by exposing the country's racial legacy and by contesting America's social divide, have galvanized activists from various communities into shaking the country's seemingly democratic surface. Remarkably, the movements' open discussions on the nation's long-time racist political establishment have prompted inquiries into the country's historical as well as cultural foundation.

Reflections on the color line have long been at the core of the public debate, interfering with other central sociopolitical conceptual forces, such as the idea(l) of meritocracy, public representation, equal opportunities, and the promise of (financial) safety and fulfillment. In particular, this article will focus on professional basketball in order to analyze how these partly conflicting interests have shaped and still shape the National Basketball Association (NBA) as well as its multiple outlets and associated media. Focusing on a widely recognized organization such as the NBA allows us to

analyze, contextualize, and interrogate simmering conflicts that would otherwise remain abstract and elusive.

From the wide range of possible basketball *foci*, this article zeroes in on the representational strategies of the NBA to market its (primarily black) players to a (mostly white) audience. Simultaneously, the NBA only has limited opportunities to alter its players due to financial ties but also due to their fostering of national values such as meritocracy, which can also be considered a central pillar of sports culture. In this light, one might be blinded by a reading of sports as "a bastion of fair play and equal opportunity," which underlines the meritocratic principle and thereby creates a "world [seemingly] free of racism." (B'beri and Hogarth 2009, 90). By doing so, professional sports cater to "the[ir] commitment to[wards] provid[ing] everyone with a fair chance to develop their own talents to the fullest, [which is] a central tenet of the American creed" (Sawhill 1999). This unidimensional conceptualization of the world of sports often results in demanding that "[politics be] kept out of sport" (MacClancy 1996, 2). Nevertheless, the NBA is not simply a collective of professional basketball players, but primarily a commercial business intertwined with the system of mass media (Stichweh 2005), and concerned with generating revenue (Wollert 2009, 75). Thereby, it must satisfy its target audience within the confined rules of the game. Simultaneously, the NBA's target audience—key to revenue and economic success—deliberately feeds into race-related dynamics and politics, as race is a constant (non-)topic in professional basketball as well as in its marketing efforts. A look into the league's history shows us that race has always been very present within the NBA. More to this point, prior to David Stern's term as commissioner in 1984, the NBA was considered "too black and drug infested" (Kiersh 1992, 28), a reference indicative of a public perception that, at the time, resulted in the severe disenfranchisement of its predominantly white following (B'beri and Hogarth 2009, 91), preventing 16 out of 23 teams from being economically profitable in 1983/1984 (Nick 2009, 79). Consequently, during Stern's term, the NBA changed its marketing strategy, in response to the commissioner's claim that race would not be an issue if handled correctly (Maharaj 1999, 232). Within the first ten years of Stern's thirty-year term, the league's annual revenue grew by 1600% (ibid.); a financially

meaningful change, indeed fostered by the commissioner's strategic call on the necessity to change marketing plans by *handling race correctly*. s. Some argue that Stern's tactic was thought to make "black men safe for (white) consumers in the interest of profit" (Hughes 2004, 164). However, by doing so, the NBA actively created images of black masculinity, changed consumer culture, and—as a proto-American sport—contributed to the United States' racial discourse. Simultaneously, one can argue that in the course of its activity, the NBA has constantly absorbed diverging cultural influences and changed its outlet accordingly, arguably in the most economically profitable way. As such, the NBA has always been affected by racial tensions in the United States while also contributing to these same articulations. Again, these sometimes articulated, sometimes unarticulated fractions are noticeable only when specific socio-political frictions emerge. In its double function, the NBA can either be affected by external tensions/fractions, which must be addressed immediately, or it can itself actively cause these tensions.

This article will focus on three exemplary forms of misconduct from which it can be derived how the NBA has responded to particular challenges in the past. These three infringements comprise the brawl known as *The Malice at the Palace* (2004), Donald Sterling's racial comments in the light of *Black Lives Matter* (2014), and the NBA's handling of the social justice movement, which widely expanded after George Floyd's death in 2020. In order to better understand and contextualize the NBA's reactions to these three moments, we decided to integrate this study with a brief history of the association itself, by specifically focusing on issues of race and representation (section 2). We will then move on to the analysis of the three cases of misconduct (section 3), and conclude our investigation with a few remarks on the factors which hold the NBA together at heart (section 4), and on NBA's strategies for maintaining a strong national status.

A (RACIAL) HISTORY OF BASKETBALL AND THE NBA

In 1891, James Naismith envisioned basketball as a gap filler for the winter season (Sahre and Pommerening 1995, 168). Basketball promptly gained popularity in the networks of

YMCAs and colleges before the first professional league was introduced in 1898, and the first international tournament was staged in 1919 (Kränzle and Brinke 2003, 52). The National Basketball League (NBL), which pioneered organized basketball from 1925 onwards, faced bankruptcy after only six years (ibid. 72), and e ven though the NBL continued to exist, teams/franchises migrated to alternative leagues. Due to the leagues' limited degree of continuity, only specific teams solidly established themselves as brands. The two most famous teams at the time were the *The New York Renaissance* and *The Harlem Globetrotters*—the Globetrotters being founded and managed by the Jewish entrepreneur Abe Saperstein in 1926. They rose to fame after providing space for black players, who, at the time, were not allowed to participate in professional sports. In 1946, the Basketball Association of America (BAA) was created, and in 1948/1949 it incorporated the National Basketball League (NBL), later rebranded as the National Basketball Association (NBA) (ibid. 73).

As the NBA authorized participation of black players in 1949, teams began to absorb black players who had been previously prevented from playing professional basketball. As a result, the Harlem Globetrotters lost most of their competitive players to NBA teams, and were reduced to an exhibition team only. Even though the Globetrotters were employed to promote American values and culture during Cold-War times, they still lost their competitive- basketball-team status (Thomas 2011, 778). By having the Minneapolis Lakers and their superstar George Mikan in the league, the NBA managed to outpace numerous ambitious associations and establish itself as the most competitive league in the 1950s (Rader 1990, 271). The Lakers were then succeeded by the Boston Celtics, who dominated the league from 1957 to 1966 with their two superstars Bill Russel and Bob Cousy (ibid.). During these times, professional basketball's viewership rose from less than 2 million spectators in 1960 to 10 million in the late 1970s (Rader 1990, 271), after incorporating various rule changes and integrating an array of awe-inspiring teams and talents. As viewership and potential revenue evolved, the American Basketball Association (ABA) emerged as a fierce competitor for the NBA, installing superstar Julius Erving as a black counterpart to the still chiefly white NBA network (Criblez 2015, 374). Despite advertising its openness towards r all

kinds of players, (and also featured black star players), an unspoken color line still existed within the NBA, as they exposed the images of the now Hall of Famers Jerry *The Logo* West and *Pistol* Pete Maravich to publicly represent the league. This clash of competitors led to a categorical segregation along racial lines happening within basketball in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s (Eitzen and Yetmann 1980, 333). Nonetheless, the ABA was only able to elude bankruptcy for nine years before being incorporated into the NBA. This being said, the 1970s marked a turning point in NBA history, now witnessing a significant increase in the number of black players compared to the number of white players, and an exponential salary rise, fostered by high levels of competition and a registered growth in public interest.

It is during that period that black players gained visibility and used their newly found social and public stage to support the Civil Rights Movement and its more bellicose Black Power division. Lew Alcindor's conversion to Islam and change of name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar personified these developments while lending the 1970s the label of "Black Power and white backlash [era]" (Goudsouzian 2016, 2), significantly impacting the NBA. While the white backlash resulted in a staggering drop in viewership, it also damaged the NBA's public image in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Cady 1979, 15). In fact, a s we mentioned earlier, the public perceived the NBA as "a drug-infested, too-black league with dwarfish Nielsen ratings" (Kiersh 1992, 28). Within the constant struggle "between 'Blackophilia' and 'Blackophobia' [...]" (Andrews and Silk 2010, 1627)—a recurring issue not only within the league but also in American society—the NBA contributed to reinforcing the very palpable black/white dichotomy diving American society

In 1984 David Stern took over the association and centered his efforts around two defining terms: consumer-friendliness and marketability. To achieve these paradigms, Stern's attention settled on getting NBA fans to identify with certain teams and players in order to increase the viewership's willingness to pay higher game prices, attend games more frequently, and consume more related merchandise (Meng, Stravos, and Westberg 2015, 199). To assure ongoing competition, Stern also implemented an abundance of rules and regulations, such as salary caps or drafts. Stern's underlying

rationale was that tension and electricity generated by fierce competition would result in higher revenue (Caudill, Mixon, and Wallace 2014, 246). Despite his efforts to guarantee competition, Stern still needed to establish certain 'faces of the league'—star players around which the league is marketed—because, as Funk and James remark, devotion towards a product is the result of "peer group acceptance, vicarious achievement, nostalgia, and star players" (2006, 206). Stern assembled these players' image based on specific principles, values, and ideologies that supported corporate narratology, so that fans and sponsors would empathize with NBA players (Gwinner 1997).

Intending to cater to a wider audience, Stern resorted to a dual strategy: build a rivalry narrative between Earvin *Magic* Johnson (a black player) and Larry Bird (a white player) while simultaneously uplifting Michael Jordan as the player who transcended color lines. As such, the NBA could appeal to earlier-times fans while reaching out to new generations. In other words, Erving Johnson and Larry Bird met the times' needs o as Stern understood them, as they matched the clean-face player profile, being both free from public scandals, therefore contributing to "the (racial) re-assemblage of the NBA" (Andrews 1999, 505). When examining the Bird/Magic rivalry, one always has to factor in the specific ethos guiding their respective teams—the Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers. While the Lakers were thriving with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar leading the way, taking them deep into playoffs, and having them serve as one of the most exciting franchises in the league (Smith 2011, 3), the Boston Celtics were struggling to win games, and therefore needed Larry Bird to lift the team up again. By adding Earvin *Magic* Johnson to the roster, the Los Angeles Lakers were able to ultimately design an impressively competitive team known as the *Showtime Lakers*. However, Johnson's and the Lakers' nicknames still leave a sour taste in many mouths, testifying to the dominant stigma ascribed to black success during the 1980s. In addition, black achievements were customarily played down as effortless or related to genetic constitution, a stereotypical idea which depreciated the considerable amount of hard work, commitment, and ability that went along with the very achievement (Carrington 2007, 4689). Again, as Williams remarks, "black athletic success was not ascribed to strategy but to attributes like height

and strength" (2006, 62). Magic Johnson playing point guard at 6 foot 9 inches and the Los Angeles Lakers' rapid-paced, highlight-centered offense epitomized the stereotypes perpetuated in the previous decade while supporting the oversimplified narrative of the genetically superior athlete meant to entertain the crowds and create showtime moments. Meanwhile, Larry Bird, who was not as athletically gifted as Johnson, embodied the stereotype of the white player who in order to overcome physical disadvantages must fascinate spectators with toughness, teamwork, intellect, and bravery (Criblez 2015, 374). Hence, not only did the Bird/Magic rivalry represent two superstar basketball players competing for championships; it also reinforced the idea of the black player as a genetically superior athlete, magically gifted with superpowers. The physical description of the black player was often opposed to the intellectual bravery of its (Kränzle and Brinke 2003, 96) white counterparts, who against all odds succeed with team play, toughness, discipline, supreme basketball IQ, and hard work (Smith 2011, 3). These dynamics were not embraced or fueled by the athletes themselves or taken from in-game statistics—Johnson was famous for his marvelous basketball IQ and jaw dropping assist totals, both traits usually assigned to team-first players. They were instead cosmetically built around specific players by media and advertisement, both (partially) controlled and/or influenced by the NBA. These tactical workings become all the more evident when one examines the description of former (white) Celtics greats, namely John Havlicek or Dave Cowens. Both players have often been adorned with descriptive qualities that emphasized their intellect, solidarity, and toughness (ibid., 5). They were portrayed based on the 1970s' trends, yet experienced enormous success in the 1980s.

After Michael Jordan was drafted into the NBA in 1984, he took the league by storm and amassed six championships in the 1990s. His unprecedented athletic advantages and leaping ability led to the nickname *Air Jordan*. After Jordan and the *Dream Team* dominated the 1992 Olympics, the NBA capitalized on their victories through a great globalization strategy, from which Jordan emerged as "perhaps the best and most well-known athlete in the world" (Dyson 1993, 64). Jordan's unstoppable ascension towards iconic status developed religious-like dimensions when he was

granted the title of "basketball's high priest" (Bradley 1991, 60) "more popular than Jesus," while also cashing in on "better endorsement deals" (Vancil 1992, 51). Jordan's capability to engage audiences was beyond compare at a time when, as David Stern recognized, TV and media exposure was indispensable to the fabrication of the player's persona. Among other factors, the emerging importance of media exposure led to the commercialization of professional sports, economic principles gaining utmost priority (Dauncey and Hare 2014, 11), and media and sponsors shaping the images of the sport's brightest stars in unprecedented ways (Steen 2013, 2234). Generally speaking, when Michael Jordan entered the league in 1984, a plethora of media related measures was being established. When the media reached their full communicative potential, Jordan, too, was at the peak of his career, made all the more successful thanks to a positive feedback loop consisting of media coverage, on-court success, and endorsement (which again, resulted in more on-screen time). Moreover, Jordan signed an endorsement deal with Nike in 1984 prior to playing his first NBA game, and had a shoe customarily designed for his needs. Nike used Jordan to establish itself as the world's top sports outfitter and had him star in numerous commercials—Jordan powered Nike's success and vice versa. Surprisingly, Jordan was kept away from the stereotypical image of urban black Americans (Andrews and Silk 2010, 1629), and e ven though the NBA embraced hip- hop culture in an endeavor to sell black culture to a white audience (Lorenz and Murray 2013, 28), Jordan was not involved in urban-related marketing activities. Therefore, it can be assumed that the marketing strategy tailor-made for the persona of Michael Jordan presumably aimed at disassociating him from multiple stigmas usually attached to urban blackness, such as misogyny, violence, hyper-masculinity, and the magnification of material wealth (Rose 2008, 1-2). Nike and the NBA presented him as the "embodiment of American virtue" (Naughton 1992, 154), as Jordan had been cut from his high-school team, yet still managed to play collegiate basketball in North Carolina, and to turn professional. Contrary to Erving Johnson as well as other black athletes, Jordan's supreme ambition and work-ethic took center stage, while discussions on his astonishing talent made him a poster child of Reaganite ideology (Andrews and Silk 2010, 1627). In various forms, Jordan's story served as a counterplot to the stereotypical

narrative of the black player. Not only was he the hardest worker in the room, but he also primarily played for the pure sake of competition instead of money or personal fame (Vancil 1992, 76). However, Jordan still re-bargained his 1996 contract to earn $30 million in a single season (Denzin 1996, 324)—a move which is partly contradictory to the image of the hard-working, competition-embracing, and not interested in material wealth persona. Therefore, it can be argued that Jordan's depiction was highly artificial and aimed at creating a black (American) hero. By revolutionizing the representation of black athletes, Jordan came to epitomize the maxims of an economically productive and patriarchal member of (primarily) white corporate life (Maharaj 1999, 230).

Even though hip-hop imagery had no impact on Michael Jordan, it was all the same applied to other superstars. As a matter of fact, the NBA tried on the one hand to embrace hip hop culture and sell it to white audiences, and on the other hand to commodify black bodies—as Michael Jordan's fabricated image undoubtedly demonstrates—and to monetize both (Leonard 2006, 160). After Michael Jordan's reign as basketball's famous flagship, the NBA redirected their superstars' representational focus and rejuvenated alliances with companies which embodied attributes the NBA had previously avoided. As Kobe Bryant rose to notoriety and served as a *Michael Jordan 2.0*, he was described as 'hardworking' and 'ultra-competitive' between his fourth (2009) and fifth (2010) championship runs. Prior to those years (in the early 2000s), the NBA attempted to merge black urban culture with corporate ideals by introducing a growing number of players to the league who brought in and exhibited a more pronounced hip-hop imagery. A common theory for this shift is that the sneaker brand AND1 tried to conquer the sneaker market by selling rough and street-proven merchandise (Campbell 2015, 53). By equipping an emerging amount of players with their merchandise, AND1 created an urban influence on the NBA. Another hypothesis argues that heart-warming rags-to-riches stories of black players overcoming their ghetto origins and achieving the American Dream in the NBA, made the league tolerate more black urban associations with basketball as the exposure of meritocratic ideals particularly pleased white audiences (Sailes 2009, 137). Regardless, as the primary customers' desires changed, the NBA's approach to audiences and players also had to adapt.

AND1 was trying to develop a consumer-friendly urban blackness that would not interfere with Nike's mainstream approach. However—in order to stand out from its market competitors—AND1 had to put a twist on the hard work, dedication, and devotion themes at the core of the Nike/Jordan campaign. Moving in a different direction, they chose authenticity as their leading theme, and featured streetballers in their commercials in order to achieve credibility for the products they were advertising. Streetball—namely basketball played outdoors, and in a less organized fashion—promotes creative self-expression (Campbell 2015, 54) by embracing a flashy playing style, nonconformist clothing, and a higher focus on individual achievement than team performance.

Accordingly, Latrell Sprewell was chosen as the AND1's brand ambassador because he was considered a troublemaker after physically assaulting his coach during the 1997 season. His 1999 campaign *I am the American Dream* demonstrates how his image fosters both an urbanely- relatable version of the American Dream (ibid., 55-6), and its own mockery. Such an approach was presently copied by sneaker manufacturer *Reebok, and made into the* Allen Iverson's *I am what I am* campaign, which staged Allen Iverson as a free-spirited, tough-looking streetball player. Iverson was the perfect choice at the time, as he catered to the urban thug image for his jewelry, tattoos, and cornrows while also establishing himself as an incredibly hard-working individual, who overcame his deficiencies in height (5'11/6'0 feet) with tremendous strength of mind and devotion. The attention the Reebok campaign paid to Iverson's individual narrative definitely contributed to achieving an important paradigm shift within the realm of basketball. Iverson's story served the purpose of reconciling significant attributes—such as mental strength—among many other defining features usually ascribed to black players. *Only the strong, a Reebok marketing campaign inspired by one of Iverson's tattoos, also committed to crossing the racial line, an* unimaginable endeavor for black players in the 1980s. Not only did Iverson experience individual success, he also led his Philadelphia 76ers to the NBA finals in 2001. The team, however, succumbed to the Los Angeles Lakers, who were spearheaded by their two superstars: the entertaining but ultra-dominant Shaquille O'Neil and the wunderkind Kobe Bryant. As the Lakers three-

peated from 1999 to 2002, the Showtime Lakers underwent a resurgence. As a result, the 2001 NBA finals showcased the two main imageries associated with black players (the ghetto-underdog vs. the Showtime Lakers 2.0) competing in the early 2000s. This both dogmatic and athletic competition resulted in massive profits as the NBA persisted in its global expansion during the 2000s (Naito and Takagi 2017), and as both teams sold astronomical amounts of merchandise. With the 76ers emerging on the scene, some experts inferred that the NBA was "not running away from associations with urban culture but marketing them to death" (Zirin 2007, 108), providing a prime example of the corporate colonization of racial issues. However, massive profit was made by exploiting the non-conformist streetball image, a move which boomeranged in December 2004.

The following section is going to examine three key transgressions highlighting underlying fractures in the otherwise stellar NBA, starting with the Malice in the Palace (2004/2005), followed by Donald Sterling's racist remarks (2014/2015), and by the NBA's reactions to the Social Justice Movement sparked by George Floyd's death (2020).

BRAWLS, SCANDALS, MISDEEDS, AND CORPORATE RESPONSES

In order to fully understand how the NBA deals with the underlying fractures within the US, one has to take a closer look at how the league manages precarious circumstances within its own ranks, because "especially in times of crisis, an organization needs to respond [...] to lessen the damage the crisis may have brought to the organization's image" (Wan and Schell 2007, 26). However, the image in this case is "not solely controlled by the organization but it is also an audience-determined construct" (ibid.). As we have outlined earlier, under Stern, the NBA fed a polished product to its audience—a relatively simple task if everything went according to the corporate script. However, when an NBA-affiliate steps out of line or the target audience's desires change, the audience blames the league. (Benoit 1997, 178). As a consequence, the carefully designed self-representation takes a hit and reveals its underlying tensions. The first relevant blow for this article is the event known as *Malice at the Palace*.

The Malice at the Palace

Because of the income urban representation generated, players that identified with the hard-nosed and rough ghetto image of streetball thrived in the NBA. Two of these players were Ben Wallace, who was endorsed by AND1 and a crucial player for the 2004 NBA champions Detroit Pistons, and Ron Artest, an uprising young player for the Indiana Pacers. The Pistons team of the time was depicted as the Bad Boys 2.0[1] and at the time had a rivalry with the Indiana Pacers, who they had won against in the 2004 Eastern Conference Finals on their way to a championship. As tempers flared during the Pacers/Pistons blowout-game on November 19, 2004, in the Palace of Urban Hills, Artest and Wallace got into a fight (Craig 2016, 21). While referees and teammates tried to deescalate the situation, Artest provocatively laid down on the scorer's table, which animated a fan to throw and hit Artest with a cup of beer, causing him to run up to the stands and physically confront the assumed attacker. Artest's actions sparked a brawl as his Pacers teammates came to his support, which reinforced the widespread image of malicious (black) players attacking harmless (white) spectators (ibid., 22). Even though every involved player was found not guilty in court, the NBA came down with harsh punishments—suspending Artest for 82 games and other players for numerous games as well—as it struggled with a plummeting public image that took their reputation back to 1984: the brawl recalled the too-black and hip-hop-like ghetto mentality-driven narrative (Leonard 2006, 159). The devastating consequences of the Malice at the Palace became obvious when the 2005 NBA finals ratings were 20% lower than the previous year (Lorenz and Murray 2013, 29). The NBA promptly reacted in 2005 by introducing a three-headed redemption strategy consisting of an age limit, a dress code, and an increase in fines for technical and flagrant fouls (Leonard 2006, 161). A particularly interesting aspect regarding black players' representation is the dress code, as it chiefly censored "racialized forms of expressions" (Lorenz and Murray 2013, 24) like snapbacks, jewelry, or bandanas. Pretending to be color blind, the league standardized white norms

[1] The original Bad Boys Pistons team was centered around Bill Laimbeer, Isiah Thomas, and Dennis Rodman, and won two Championships from 1988-1990

not to combat blackness, as they reasoned, but rather to assure professionality (ibid.), a stance that led them to discriminate between the good 'other' (successful, well-dressed, professional) and the bad 'other' (bragging, excessive, pompous) (Leonard 2006, 161). It can be argued that black players were presented as "an extension of a broader black community perpetually plagued by 'social pathologies'" (May 2009, 444)—pathologies which, in the logic of the league, needed to be regulated by corporate professionalism as expressed by the dress code order

When dealing with an image crisis it is not important "whether the business *in fact* is responsible for the offensive act, but whether the firm is *thought* to be [...] by the relevant audience" (Benoit 1997, 178). Therefore, the NBA—desperate for a scapegoat—chose infantilization as the guiding principle for their players' representation (Hall 2004, 149). They portrayed players as incapable of managing their abilities and assets on and off the court. On the athletic level, a player could only thrive if regulated by white authorities (Ferber 2007, 20-11) coached by a white person, with the player submitting to the greater good of the team, and secondly, bound to those enforced rules on technical and flagrant fouls (Neuhaus and Thomas 2021). Off-court, some players gathered media interest by going insolvent briefly after retiring from the NBA. Probably the most ignominious example is Allen Iverson reportedly spending $150 million and facing bankruptcy (Carson 2015), which supported the NBA's—unarticulated, yet present—claim that black players were not able to handle their pecuniary potential properly (Banet-Weiser 1999, 408). The obvious intent to infantilize black players became more blatant as journalists reported that after 2005 Stern unforgivingly pursued his program and "treated players like children" (Cohen 2012). Additionally, the NBA initiated instructional classes on finances (Furman 2015) and thereby corroborated the idea of the compassionate (team) owners and the reckless black players, giving way to a "perverted and romanticized parent-child-relationship" (Neuhaus and Thomas 2021, 185) that overtly promoted corporate professionalism, but covertly established white culture as the exclusively acceptable norm.

Donald Sterling's Racist Remarks

On April 25, 2014, a recording of Donald Sterling—who at the time was the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers—making racist remarks to his girlfriend telling her, among other things, to not "bring black people to [his] games" (Cramer 2019, 272- 3) surfaced and set the (NBA) world on fire. That flame was fueled after "fans soon learned that Sterling had a history of racial discrimination that was overlooked by the league" (ibid. 273). In light of these transgressions, during the 2014 playoffs NBA players were collectively prepared to boycott games, leading them to facing the "possibility of work stoppage and loss of corporate sponsorship, being a toxic combination that the NBA needed to resolve" (Lavelle 2016, 425). Even though players did not go through with boycotting games, the Los Angeles Clippers staged a silent protest during their following road playoff game against the Golden State Warriors on April 27, 2014, by collectively removing their Clippers apparel, placing it at center court, and wearing "the rest of their warm-up gear inside out" (Newport 2014). With the public eye eagerly awaiting the league to take disciplinary action there was no way for the NBA's new commissioner Adam Silver to further ignore Sterling's behavior, who had "built a reputation as the worst owner in pro sports by bungling hires, skimping on contracts and heckling his own players" (Jenkins 2014). Consequently, Adam Silver held a press conference on April 29, 2014, in which he announced Sterling's banishment for life, "vowed to force a sale of the franchise" (ibid.), and fined him $2.5 million dollars (Cramer 2019, 272). These developments demonstrate how Silver took his time to assess the public backlash and resort to the old reliable scapegoating-strategy. Arguably, Silver chose these radical measures to rapidly resolve and forget about the scandal by sacrificing the NBA's longest tenured owner. Indeed, he could not afford the media narrative and investigations to blow up and reveal the "historically white and largely unaffected leadership, and the hegemony on whiteness which remains under-critiqued" (Hylton and Lawrence 2016, 2746). However, it should not be forgotten that the NBA only reacted when public attention was directed to the topic, highlighting that the league had not been interested in values *per se* but only when they interfered with economic interest.

Social Justice and the NBA in 2020/21

As NBA players got increasingly active on social media and pushed their own political agendas forward (Xu, Yu, and Hoi 2015, 81), the league had to adjust its course. While a group of athletes led by LeBron James wore *I can't breathe* shirts following Eric Garner's death in 2014 (Feeney 2014), the phrase regained momentum in June 2020 after George Floyd's murder. Six years after the Donald Sterling incident and with the *Black Lives Matter* movement exponentially gaining ground within American society (as well as abroad), the NBA "took a firm and controversial position, allowing players to wear social justice messages on the back of their jerseys" (Pazzano and Spagnolo 2021, 2). This symbolizes an analogous change in the NBA's marketing strategy regarding the inclusion of public discourse or politically driven discussions in their commercial maneuvers, as the league "responded to the crisis as a problem in public relations and a marketing opportunity" (Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020, 2), because the increasingly socially aware audience and sponsors "expect the same from brands they wish to either buy or invest in" (Pazzano and Spagnolo 2021, 2). Therefore, the NBA timely jumped on the social justice bandwagon by overtly showing that "they are aware of ongoing racial injustice in the United States and conspicuously [demonstrating] the league's moral values" (Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020, 3) thereby concealing the "prevalence of whiteness at the highest levels of sport governance" (Hylton and Lawrence 2016, 2746) within its own ranks. As a result, Adam Silver dealt with the growing fractures in the United States and evaded potential representational scandals caused by the *Black Lives Matter* movement by simply embracing the respective associations between the social movement and the NBA, "marketing them to death" (Zirin 2007, 108). This could be considered yet another example of "corporate colonization[2]" (Deetz 1992) as well as corporate-driven re-interpretation of reality.

[2] Corporate colonization (Deetz 1992) describes the priority of corporate idea(l)s—i.e. efficiency, rationalism, and optimization—over others in associations. All of these ideas correspond to the system of business and put measurable growth (i.e. revenue, market-share, etc.) above all other benchmarks of success. Further, corporate colonization describes how these ideas mutate (within organizations as well as across different organizations), into acknowledged qualities. In his work, Deetz zeroes in on communication and inner-organization procedures. However, his analysis makes use of corporate colonization to partially throw light on the illustration of basketball players. As corporate

While the original focus was on the re-narration of blackness, in times of (perceived) crisis the league extends its corporate narrative onto several more far-ranging aspects. This last case illustrates the interdependence between NBA and its players as the protest, motivated by a desire for social justice, has been broadcasted not only by mainstream media or made known by social activists, but it has also been shared on several players' social media handles. Moreover, the NBA adopted a social justice stance as its core audience seemed to share the same values. On this basis, the mainstream framing of racism as something to be denounced and eradicated from society was adopted as the corporate NBA narrative, this time in line with the players' socio-political viewpoints. We encourage f uture research to investigate more deeply into the manners in which players, in their public commentary and/or social media handles, actually stray from mainstream narratives and from corporate understanding of events, topics, and (public) discussions. Based on the observations made in the three misconducts outlined in this paper, it can be hypothesized that players' agency is limited to its accordance with mainstream appeals and is, therefore, regulated accordingly.

CONCLUSION: RACE AS THE NBA'S (DAMAGED) CODA

The NBA has had several incidents in which frictions along racial lines had to be managed. Over the last fifteen years, a trend towards (black) player empowerment can be observed, as the NBA shifted from the infantilization and child-like treatment of black players after the *Malice in the Palace* to the crisis aversion strategy set in place after Donald Sterling's racial remarks and the latest *Black Lives Matter* developments, where the NBA acted as a frontrunner for social justice. However, believing the changed approach to solely stem out of benevolence and kindness would be historical amnesia, not to mention thoroughly naïve. The NBA's management of racial tensions is a prime

colonization primarily describes a particular way of thinking and acting, it can also apply to various collaborating instances, such as the NBA as well as associated companies (i.e. shoe producers) Due to the racial lens these issues are analyzed with, corporate colonization has been—at least with regard to the colonization aspect—expanded in its scope, and has acquired an additional meaning (Neuhaus and Thomas 2021, 176).

example of corporate colonization (Deetz 1992), meaning the interpretation of the world and the adjustment of one's behavior in a way that generates the highest possible revenue. This means, within the frame of this article, that the NBA has constantly adapted its stance on race aiming for the maximum consensus between its financially potent audiences' desires and the consumable product. Consequently, as the mainstream opinion on social justice and race related issues has changed, the league has modified its output accordingly to ensure revenue. This leads to this article's conclusion that—at least in the observed and analyzed cases—the universally unifying element that drove the NBA in its decision making was, is, and probably will always be money and corporate interest, regardless of the causes of the (social) fracture or friction. Considering the NBA—the key institution of a proto-American sport—and its handling of racial issues a commentary on the current state of the United States, corporate interest seems to be the dominating principle at hand; an observation which has also been made in other fields (Wolin 2015; Neuhaus, Jacobsen & Vogt 2021). This leads us to ask to what extent the—partly contradictory—ideas and ideals outlined in the introduction are subjected to corporate logic. Further, this also raises the question of whether the observable fractures of the otherwise United States should be re-evaluated and/or reframed as tensions arising from the clash of the interests of corporate actors and larger parts of civil society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andrews, David L. 1999. "Whither the NBA, Whither America?" *Peace Review* 11, no.4: 505-10.

Andrews, David L. & Silk, Michael L. 2010. Basketball's Ghettocentric Logic. *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no.11: 1626-44.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 1999. "Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of

Race and Gender." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 23, no.4: 403-20.

B'beri, Boulou E., and Peter Hogarth. 2009. "White America's Construction of Black Bodies: The Case of Ron Artest as a Model of Covert Racial Ideology in the NBA's Discourse." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 2, no.2: 89-106.

Benoit, William L. 1997. "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication." *Public Relations Review* 23, no.2: 177-86.

Boren, Cindy. 2014. "NBA Players Were 'Ready to Boycott' Games if NBA Hadn't Acted Against Donald Sterling." *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2014/04/29/nba-players-were-ready-to-boycott-games-if-nba-hadnt-acted-against-donald-sterling/.

Bradley, Michael. 1991. "Air Everything." *Basketball Forecast* 2: 60-7.

Cady, Steve. 1979. "Basketball's Image Crisis." *The New York Times,* August 11, 1979.

Campbell, Bobby. 2015. "Hot Sauce and White Chocolate: And1 and Ghetto Style in Basketball." *Communication Design* 3, no.1: 51-61.

Carrington, Ben. 2007. "Sport and Race." In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by George Ritzer, 4686–90. Oxford, EN: Blackwell.

Caudill, Steven B., Frank G. Mixon Jr., and Scott Wallace. 2014. "Life on the Red Carpet: Star Players and Referee Bias in the National Basketball Association." *Internal Journal of the Economics of Business* 21, no.2: 245-53.

Cohen, Josh. 2012. "Why David Stern Must Step Down as NBA Commissioner After 2012-13." *Bleacher Report*, October 24, 2017. http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1382442-why-david-stern-must-step-down-as-nba-commissioner-after-2012-13.

Craig, Richard. 2016. "Malice in the Palace: The Incident." *A Journal on Black Men* 4, no.2: 21-41.

Cramer, Lindsay M. 2019. "Postracism Mythology: NBA Commissioner Adam Silver's 'Heroic' Banishment of Racism From the NBA." *Communication & Sport* 7, no.3: 271-91.

Criblez, Adam J. 2015. "White Men Playing a Black Man's Game: Basketball's 'Great

White Hopes' of the 1970s." *Journal of Sport History* 42, no.3: 371-81.

Carson, Dan. 2015. "Matt Barnes Says Allen Iverson Routinely Dropped $40K at Strip Clubs." *Bleacher Report*, April 10, 2015.

Daniels, O. C. Bobby. 1976. "The Bicentennial: Contradictions in American Democracy." *The Black Scholar* 7, no.10: 2–6.

Dauncey, Hugh, and Geoff Hare. 2014. "Sport and Media: Representing and Conceptualising Identity and Community." *Movement and Sports Sciences - Science et Motricite* 86, no.4: 5-14.

Deetz, Stanley A. 1992. *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization: Developments in Communication and the Politics of Everyday Life*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Denzin, Norman K. 1996. "More Rare Air: Michael Jordan on Michael Jordan." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 13, no.4: 319-324.

Dyson, Michael Eric. 1993. "Be like Mike?: Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire." *Cultural Studies* 7, no.1: 64-72.

Eitzen, Stanely D. & Yetman, Norman R. (1980). Immune to Racism? In: G. H. Sage (Ed.), *Sport and American Society: Selected Readings* (3rd ed., pp. 322-338). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Feeney, Nolan. 2014. "Lebron James Wears 'I Can't Breathe' Shirt During Warm-Ups." *Time Magazine*, December 8, 2014.

Ferber, Abby L. 2007. "The construction of Black Masculinity: White Supremacy Now and Then." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 31, 11-24.

Funk, Daniel, and Jeffrey James. 2006. "Consumer Loyalty: the Meaning of Attachment in the Development of Sport Team Allegiance." *Journal of Sport Management* 20 no. 2: 189-217.

Furman, P. 2015, November 17. "Sports Leagues Get in the Financial Education Game." *The Alert Investor*, November 17, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2017. https://www.thealertinvestor.com/sports-leagues-get-in-the-financial-education-game/.

Goudsouzian, Aram. 2016. "From Lew Alcindor to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: Race, Religion, and Representation in Basketball, 1968-1975." *Journal of American Studies* 1, no.2: 1-34.

Gwinner, Kevin. 1997. "A Model of Image Creation and Image Transfer in Event Sponsorship." *International Marketing Review* 14, no.3: 145-58.

Hall, Stuart. 2004. "Das Spektakel des Anderen." In *Stuart Hall:Ideologie Identität Repräsentation (Ausgewählte Schriften 4)*, edited by Juha Koivisto, and Andreas Merkens, 108-67. Hamburg: Argument Verlag.

Hughes, Glyn. 2004. "Managing Black Guys: Representation, Corporate Culture, and the NBA." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 21, no.2: 163-184.

Hylton, Kevin, and Stefan Lawrence. 2016. "'For your ears only!' Donald Sterling and Backstage Racism in Sport." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no.15: 2740-57.

J. Cole. 2017. High for Hours. Single, Dreamville, Spotify.

Kiersh, Edward. 1992. "Mr. Robinson vs. Air Jordan: The Marketing Battle for

Olympic Gold." *Los Angeles Times,* Sunday Magazine, 28. March 22, 1992.

Kränzle, Peter & Brinke, Margit (2003). *Basketball verständlich gemacht:*. München: Copress Sport.

Kurth, James. 2016. "A History Of Inherent Contradictions: The Origins And End Of American Conservatism." *American Conservativism* 56: 13-54.

Lavelle, Katherine L. 2016. "No Room for Racism: Restoration of Order in the NBA." *Communication & Sport* 4, no.4: 424-41. doi:10.1177/2167479515584046.

Lee, Jenkins. 2014. "New Commissioner Adam Silver is his Own Man." *Sports Illustrated*. May 20, 2014. https://www.si.com/nba/2014/05/20/adam-silver-nba-commissioner-donald-sterling.

Leonard, David J. 2006. "The Real Color of Money - Controlling Black Bodies in the NBA." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 30, no.2: 158-79. doi:10.1177/0193723506286725.

Lorenz, Stacy L., and Rod Murray. 2013. "'Goodbye to the Gangstas': The NBA Dress Code, Ray Emery, and the Policing of Blackness in Basketball and Hockey." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 38, no.1: 23-50.

MacClancy, Jeremy, ed. 1996. "Sport, Identity and Ethnicity." In *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, 1-20. Oxford: Berg.

Maharaj, Gitanjali. 1999. "Talking Trash: Late Capitalism, Black (Re)productivity, and Professional Basketball." In *SportCult*, edited by Randy Martin and Toby Miller, 227-40. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

May, Reuben A. 2009. "The Good and Bad of It All: Professional Black Male Basketball Players as Role Models for Young Black Male Basketball Players." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 26, no.3: 443-61.

Meng, Matthew D., Constantino Stravos, and Kate Westberg. 2015. "Engaging Fans through Social Media: Implications for Team Identification." *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal* 5, no.3: 199-217.

Montez de Oca, Jeffrey, Sherry Mason and Sung Ahn. 2020. "Consuming for the Greater Good: 'Woke' Commercials in Sports Media." *Communication & Sport* 20, no.10: 1-23.

Naughton, Jim. 1992. *Taking to the Air: The Rise of Michael Jordan*. New York, NY: Warner Books.

Naito, Hisahiro, and Yu Takagi. 2017. "Is Racial Salary Discrimination Disappearing in the NBA? Evidence from Data during 1985-2005." *International Review of Applied Economics* 31, no.5: 1-19.

Neuhaus, Till, and Niklas Thomas. 2021. "Corporate Colonization of Blackness – The Representation of Blackness in the National Basketball Association from 1984 to 2005." *New Horizons in English Studies*, no.6: 175-189.

Neuhaus, Till, Jacobsen, Marc & Vogt, Michaela. 2021. „Der verdeckte Megatrend? – Bildungshistorische Reflexionen zur fortschreitenden Digitalisierung als Treiber von Standardisierungstendenzen." *k:ON – Kölner Online Journal für Lehrer*innenbildung*, no. 4(2): 233-252.

Newport, Kyle (2014, April 27). Clippers Players Hold Protest by Wearing Team Shirts Inside out for Warm-Ups. Bleacher Report.

Nick, Marcus (2009). Der Vater des Erfolgs. *Basket 9-10*, 78-79.

Pazzona, Matteo, and Nicola Spagnolo. 2021. *Do Not Shut Up and Do Dribble: The Price of Activism*. New York, NY: Wiley Publishing.

Rader, Benjamin G. 1990. *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports.* 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Rose, Tricia. 2008. *The Hip Hop Wars What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop and Why It Matters*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas.

Sahre, Elisabeth, and Gudrun Pommerening. 1995. *Basketball und Streetball: Vom Anfänger Zum Könner*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verl.

Sailes, Gary. 2009. "R. A. Buford, Living Through the Hoop: High School Basketball, Race and the American Dream." *Journal of Youth Adolescence* 38, no.1: 137-38.

Sawhill, Isabel V. (1999, March 1). Still the Land of Opportunity?. *Brookings*.

Smith, John Matthew. 2011. "'Gifts That God Didn't Give': White Hopes, Basketball, and the Legend of Larry Bird." *Massachusetts Historical Review* 13, no.1: 1-30.

Steen, Reuben A. 2013. "Power Play – Sport, the Media and Popular Culture." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30, no.18: 2234-36. doi:10.1080/09523367.2013.854470

Stichweh, Rudolph. 2005. *Inklusion und Exklusion: Studien zur Gesellschaftstheorie*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

Thomas, Damion. 2011. "Around the World: Problematizing the Harlem Globetrotters as Cold War Warriors." *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 14, no.6: 778-91.

Vancil, Mark. 1992. "Playboy Interview: Michael Jordan." *Playboy Magazine* 39, no.5: 51-164.

Wan, Hua-Hsin, and Robert Schell. 2007. "Reassessing Corporate Image – An Examination of How Image Bridges Symbolic Relationships with Behavioral Relationships." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 19, no.1: 25-45.

Wollert, Moritz. 2009. "Finanzkrise: Angst vor der Zukunft." *Basket 7-8,* 74-75.

Williams, Jeffre A. 2006). "Flagrant Foul: Racism in 'The Ron Artest Fight'." *UCLA Entertainment Law Review* 13, no.1: 55-114.

Wolin, Sheldon S. 2015. *Democracy Inc. - Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Xu, Chenyan, Yang Yu, and Chun-Keung Hoi. 2015. "Hidden In-Game Intelligence in NBA Players' Tweets." *Communications of the ACM* 58, no.11: 80-89. doi:10.1145/2735625

Zirin, Dave. 2007. *Welcome to the Terrordome: The Pain, Politics, and Promise of Sports*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

Niklas Thomas studies American Studies as well as Physical Education at the University of Münster where he hopes to soon graduate with a B.A. degree. In Münster, he works as a student assistant, a sport's commentator, as well as a sport's instructor. Prior to his current occupations, he held a position as a language assistant at Ashville College in Harrogate (England). Even though he is still in the final phase of his B.A. degree, Niklas has published articles – focusing on the culture-sports-nexus – in internationally peer-reviewed journals.

Till Neuhaus currently works and researches at Bielefeld University's (Germany) faculty of Education. His research interests are located in the field of educational assessment, testing, and standardization as well as the psychological dimension of decision-making processes. In his Ph.D. project he analyzes Special Needs Assessment Procedures from different temporal and cultural backgrounds. Prior to his current occupation, he obtained respective master degrees in Education (M.Ed.), Interamerican Studies (M.A.), and Political Science (M.A.) at Bielefeld University and published several educational as well as cultural studies related journal articles and book chapters.