

MORE THAN A GAME: DECODING THE CULTURAL TAPESTRY WOVEN BY LEBRON AND BASKETBALL

Samuel Alexander Harper

Communication, Journalism, and Media Department Edinboro University of Pennsylvania,
Edinboro, PA 16444

Abstract: This article analyzes the cultural impact of the documentary film "More Than a Game" on African American communities. The film showcases the life of LeBron James and his teammates during their high school years in Akron, Ohio, highlighting the significance of community, race, and class elements in documentary filmmaking. The article critically examines negative media portrayals of African American males and argues that documentaries, such as "More Than a Game," offer a different perspective on African American male experiences. The documentary provides truthful narratives about these communities that are often muted by mainstream media institutions. Moreover, the analysis highlights the importance of friendship, race, and cultural community in providing scholars with a crucial area of study that informs themes of friendship over athletic ability. The article offers a historical overview of sports documentaries, particularly those focused on African American basketball players, and their impact on media perceptions of African American males. Films that are produced by members familiar with African American culture provide a different frame of reference and offer a more authentic portrayal of the African American experience. The authors also point out that fear is often a theme present in media portrayal of Black athletes, and this narrative surrounds their physicality, strength, and natural ability. Overall, this article offers insights into the impact of documentary filmmaking on African American communities and the importance of truthful narratives in shaping perspectives about African American males.

Keywords: More Than a Game, LeBron James, African American males, documentary filmmaking, race, class, community, media portrayals, friendship, sports documentaries.

Introduction

How significant are race, class, and community elements in documentary filmmaking, especially when analyzing how researchers can study these components through sports? LeBron James is one of the most recognized athletes in the world due to his exploits on the basketball court, but in his hometown of Akron, Ohio, he's also well-known for his involvement in The Promise School, which opened in 2018. However, James' story began much earlier, and the film *More Than a Game* addresses his relationship with several teammates during his high school years on and off the court. James' narrative is unique if put into the backdrop of his St. Vincent-St. Mary high school basketball team, located in Akron, Ohio. Assessing the culture of this team is essential to understanding the humble beginnings of this outstanding player. Sports documentaries such as *Hoop Dreams* and *Soul in the Hole* have focused on basketball catalyzing an individual player to move out of severe living conditions, sometimes located in an urban area of America (Gardner & Foster, 1997; James, Gilbert & Marx, 1994). According to McDonald (2007), "Sport documentaries constitute a significant part

of the documentary tradition. Yet they remain on the fringes of the nascent discipline of documentary studies" (p. 208). *Hoop Dreams*, released in 1994, highlights two main characters, William Gates and Arthur Agee, who attempt to use basketball for a promising career in the National Basketball Association (NBA). The documentary is influential in this genre but fails to highlight the friendships among African American teammates (James et al., 1994). However, *More Than a Game*, released in 2009, highlights the bond between African American teammates at St. Vincent-St. Mary High School in Akron (Mason, Jr., Belman, & Mann, 2009). The documentary includes LeBron James and the friendships and associations established as this group of young African American athletes form a cohesive bond of friendship, both on and off the basketball court.

Documentaries have often served as integral cultural indicators for scholars attempting to understand the culture, class, and communication styles of a community. Still, African American sports figures are sometimes simply portrayed as naturally gifted athletes, which negates the importance of friendship and African American male role models. According to Mastro, Blecha, and Seate (2011):

In particular Black athletes in sports ranging from the NBA to the NFL to MLB are addressed in reference to what is perceived to be innate talents, such as physical ability, athleticism, and brute strength; identified as superior to the natural abilities of White athletes. (p. 527)

This paper analyzes *More Than a Game* to highlight how friendship, race, and cultural community provide scholars with a crucial area of study that informs the theme of friendship over athletic ability. This chapter will consider friendship, stereotypes, and role modeling through the characters and their experiences in the film. It is essential to perform the following tasks to assess some of this information adequately. First, provide information on the importance of sports documentaries related to the discursive study of sports, especially highlighting how basketball and African American athletes have been covered in films over the years. Second, present findings on examining African American athletes, which are portrayed negatively in the media. Third, highlight *More Than a Game*, and analyze evidence of friendship and male bonding within the movie, elements frequently missing in media outlets throughout the country.

Stereotypes of African American Males

African American males have been negatively stigmatized throughout the history of the United States. From slavery, Jim Crow, and modern-day racism, black males continue to be labeled deviant and violent.

Glassner's notable book, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (2009), is a sobering account of the reality for men residing in communities plagued by violence. According to Glassner (2009):

Consider Americans' fear of black men. These are perpetuated by the excessive attention paid to the dangers that a small percentage of African-American men create for other people, and by the relative lack of attention to dangers that a majority of black men face themselves. (p. 109). However, if Black men should be feared, why do the statistics inform another story? Why are black men feared when they are most in danger of being harmed or murdered? Glassner (2009) stated:

Who does stand a realistic chance of being murdered? You guessed it: minority males. AA black man is about eighteen times more likely to be murdered than is a white woman. All told, the murder rate

for black men is double that of American soldiers in World War II. And for black men between the ages of fifteen and thirty, violence is the leading cause of death. (p. 112).

Other problematic statistics indicate that significant problems exist for this population. African American males comprise 1 million out of the total 2.3 million individuals (43.5%) incarcerated in the United States, with nearly half (49%) arrested before their 23rd birthday (Brame, Bushway, Paternoster, & Turner, 2014). Many studies have been done on the role of the media in perpetuating negative stereotypes of African American males and other ethnic minority groups. (Dixon, 2006; Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Mastro, 2003; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Oliver et al., 2014). Anderson & Raney (2017) emphasized this point by saying:

In news media specifically, one (over)representation that has continually been identified as that of African

Americans (especially males) as criminals, leading to what many refer to as "the Black criminal stereotype." Although research has consistently found that distorted news portrayals of criminals, in general, can lead to stereotypical judgments regarding race and crime, scholars have yet to examine the extent to which such effects may also extend to the specific case of sport news. (p. 264) Negative portrayals of African American males in sports is an American narrative, which continues to be espoused by some American sports outlets and media personalities. Specifically, African American men are often portrayed as violent, mindless, and predatory. This may be partly because media outlets are filmed through a white lens, which negates the native voice of the culture under study (Curry, 2017). In fact, Rudrow (2019) addressed this exigence when he says, "In television, because writers, producers, directors, and media executives continue to be primarily White men, representations about Black maleness continue to be fueled by racist and reductive ideas about Black life through the scripting process" (p. 635). This quote supports our argument that African American documentaries, as a genre, and especially those about basketball, allow a narrative to be constructed that is truthful to the story being told in these communities, especially ones muted by mainstream media institutions. Unfortunately, this muting of voices of people of color continues to fuel some of the racist stereotypes of African American males. Anderson and Raney (2017) provided a detailed description of this phenomenon:

For example, the concept "African Americans" will be associated with a number of other concepts in one's memory, including (depending on one's experiences) "friend," "coworker," "teacher," "shop owner," "basketball player," "minister, –astrophysicist," and so forth. The concept may also be associated with stereotypical concepts such as "dangerous" or "criminal," and those concepts may also be associated with others, such as "fear" or "avoid." If one concept, such as "dangerous," is primed in the context of a media portrayal of an African American, then related cognitions may also be activated, such as "fear" or "avoid." Such activation strengthens the associations between those concepts. Thus, if the same individual later sees an African American teenage male walking down the sidewalk, then his or her cognitive network associated with African Americans may be activated—including activation of terms like "dangerous" and "avoid"—which can lead to perceptions of the teenager as dangerous and which might induce fear and cause the individual to avoid the young man. (p. 266).

These comments are significant for a myriad of reasons. First, the first part of this quote deals with the positive attributes associated with this community. Interestingly, the basketball player is among

the descriptors mentioned, suggesting people's perceptions of African American males and sports. However, fear seems to be a theme present in this quote but is evident throughout the literature dealing with racial stereotypes. The narrative surrounding the media perceptions of Black athletes highlights their physicality, strength, and natural ability (Angelini & Billings, 2010; Billings, 2003; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Eastman & Billings, 2001). As Grainger, Newman, and Andrews (2006) explained, this stereotyping of natural Black athleticism "suggests that African Americans possess innate physiological advantages while conversely lacking the necessary skills and intelligence to succeed in other occupational areas" (p. 452).

The following section will highlight how African American men, especially basketball players and teams, are provided a different frame of reference when a member familiar with the culture is behind producing the documentary.

Basketball Documentaries

How can Black males, especially ones involved in sports, be portrayed outside the lens of mainstream media institutions or filmmaking? One answer is sports documentaries. This genre of filmmaking has allowed the insider culture to be distributed to mainstream outlets, providing a rich and insightful experience for the observer. Documentaries such as *Hoop Dreams*, *Soul in the Hole*, *On the Shoulders of Giants*, and for this study, *More Than a Game*, offer narratives that provide a differing view of the African American male experience (Gardner & Foster, 1997; Mason, Jr. et al., 2009; Sheppard, 2017). These and others offer a divergent perspective, especially showing the normalcy of this culture, which is often not presented in mainstream movies or documentaries. Producers of these films, both Black and White, often employ their documentaries as alternatives that display clear images of their cultural communities, as presented in popular culture (Nichols, 1992). Sheppard (2017) solidified this point, writing:

Nonfiction sports films and their attendant histories, features, and narratives broaden the case studies and, by extension, the aesthetic/cinematic strategies associated with the tradition. As a result, contemporary sports films like *On the Shoulders of Giants* are a growing, yet, critically neglected nonfiction subcategory committed to historicizing and producing alternative narratives about/by Black subjects. (p. 464)

Du Bois' seminal book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, released in 1899, provides a starting point on the generalizations of the Black community. According to Du Bois (1899), "There is always a strong tendency on the part of the community to consider the Negroes as composing one practically homogeneous mass" (p. 321). Documentary films such as those mentioned previously refute this idea while focusing on the uniqueness of the Black male basketball culture. For example, Sheppard (2017) wrote about the documentary, *On The Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Team You've Never Heard*, as a prime example of a narrative that describes the experiences and influence of the Rens, the first all-Black professional basketball team in the United States. According to Sheppard (2017):

African American documentary encompasses a broad range of film, video, and digital media types. These media texts document, interpret and provide perspectives on the social and political as well as aesthetic and economic forces that shape Black history, culture, and communities. As counternarratives on Black experiences, these works challenge distorted representations of Black

people in mainstream media. Many Black cultural producers turn to documentary as an alternative form to control the images that define themselves in popular culture. (p. 464).

Sheppard's observation is relevant to the argument that documentaries about people of color can act as art that informs about cultures not often viewed by mainstream audiences. *Hoop Dreams*, released in 1994 and directed by Steve James, is considered one of the best sports documentaries of all time (Ebert, 1994; James et al., 1994). The movie takes place in an inner-city neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois, and features two African American kids trying to receive college scholarships through their skills as basketball players. The movie covers six years in the lives of William Gates and Arthur Agee, starting in eighth grade and continuing to their first year in college. Though differences exist between the two, their narratives are intertwined as viewers encounter their family situations, neighborhoods, and obstacles such as crime and violence that are part of their everyday life experiences. *Hoop Dreams* concentrates more on the individuals and the family units, while the documentary, *More Than a Game*, emphasizes friendships between African American males who are teammates. The following sections focus on the documentary *More Than a Game*, taking a close look at the key figures and themes in the film and addressing its significance within the genre of documentaries signifying African American male basketball culture.

More Than A Game

More Than a Game is a crucial addition to this genre of filmmaking and is groundbreaking in its precise representation of African American male friendships within the context of a highly successful basketball team. The film is informative, tackling topics such as race, stereotypes, single-parent households, and troubled neighborhoods within the context of everyday life and a love for basketball. Like the other documentaries mentioned earlier, *More Than a Game* provides a unique framework for the changing nature of sports documentaries by focusing less on the sports aspect and more on the close interpersonal relationships among the critical figure., all African American males. These relationships – more than basketball – form the central theme of the documentary, which would fall into the category of minority cultural production. Klotman& Cutler (1999) described the African American culture as one in which:

Black media makers function as creative visionaries—producers, writers, and/or directors—committed to make black life visible; to define black personal and collective identity in ways that counter mass media representation; to find appropriate, expressive film/video language; to gain access to and control of the means of production; to reach an audience; to create effective social and political works. (p. xix)

With the popularity of LeBron James, it would make sense for the directors to focus on this star, and he is undoubtedly an integral figure. However, the movie primarily showcases the intimate connection between five African American young men. The documentary, *More Than a Game*, was co-written by Kristopher Belman and Brad Hogan, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2008, and was released in the U.S. in October 2009 (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009; Safaya, 2009). The film highlights the relationships between the five young African American players and their coach, Dru Joyce II, and their connection to Akron, Ohio. Thus, Akron, Ohio, becomes an essential role throughout the tenure of the movie. The key figures in the documentary are the five teammates: future NBA superstar LeBron James, coach's son Dru Joyce III, Romeo Travis, Sian Cotton, and Willie McGee, along with the head coach, Dru Joyce II, known to most as "Coach Dru."

More Than a Game begins with a shot of Akron, Ohio, and the Salvation Army located on Maple Street and becomes an essential backdrop to the movie. As the camera pans on these places, Coach Dru says, "Basketball is a vehicle that gets you from point A to point B. Use basketball, don't let it use you" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). The comment is significant and suggests two themes: 1) the importance of basketball in these young men's lives, and 2) the opportunity the game can provide for those willing to work hard to change their position in life.

More Than a Game extends and expands upon the African American documentary tradition. Klotman & Cutler (1999) stated, "The modern-day African American Documentary film and video continues a tradition of documenting film and authenticating alternative, undervalued, and unrecorded Black experience from inside the culture" (p. xv). Research has established the negative image portrayed in mainstream media about African American men. However, one research area that was not covered is the stereotypes of African American fathers. Since Coach Dru becomes a central figure in this documentary, it is also fruitful to consider this much-maligned demographic information. In an article in *The Chicago Reporter* dated June 13, 2019, Saaed Richardson shared insight into common descriptions of African American fatherhood:

This viewpoint about black fatherhood is a well-established structure of thought, with a host of supporting beliefs that reinforce it like rebar in a concrete slab: society is devastated because the majority of African American fathers are not at home nor involved in the lives of their children. The solution, therefore, is for black men to return to their responsibilities. These statements are stereotypes, fabrications and completely wrong. And the impact of these thoughts is girded in the foundations of American society, from systems of education, to access to employment, to incarceration. (p. 2)

Richardson's comments address the stereotypical idea that African American fathers are too often absent in the lives of their children and families and therefore contribute significantly to societal ills. While the proposed solution of returning to their responsibilities seems oversimplified, some statistics confirm a significant issue exists in single-parent households within the African American community. For example, Livingston (2018) stated:

The share of children who are living with an unmarried parent varies by race and ethnicity. More than half (58%) of black children are living with an unmarried parent – 47% with a solo mom. At the same time, 36% of Hispanic children are living with an unmarried parent, as are 24% of white children. The share of Asian children living with unmarried parents is markedly lower (13%). (para. 5)

When employing race as a template, 74 percent of white children below 18 live with both parents, compared to only 38.7 percent of African American children living with both (Price, 2016). It is important to note that single-parent households are essential contributors to the American family unit. For example, LeBron James' mother, Gloria, raised him successfully as a single parent in Akron. Specifically, statistics indicate that significant problems exist for this population. African American males comprise 1 million out of the total 2.3 million individuals (43.5%) incarcerated in the United States, with nearly half (49%) arrested before their 23rd birthday (Brame et al., 2014). The problem of higher incarceration rates indeed serves as a catalyst leading to more singleparent households in the African American community. Michele Alexander, an Ohio State law professor, wrote *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Among the statistics

garnered from her research, more African American men in the prison system now than there were slaves before the beginning of the Civil War (Alexander, 2012).

However, Coach Dru's narrative is uplifting and shows a different perspective of African American males and fathers. Born on July 26, 1955, in East Liverpool, Ohio, Dru Joyce II graduated from Ohio University and began a successful career in corporate America. The family moved to Akron in 1984, and Joyce started coaching his son just over a decade later, leading to an eventual career change. Coach Dru and his wife Carolyn appear happily married, are parents of four, and reside in Akron. The coach tweeted his thanks to the players, coaches, and families for their support after winning his record-setting eighth state championship in 2018, including a "Special shout to my queen, Carolyn, my soulmate" (Joyce, 2018). Their relationship is in clear opposition to the stereotype of the African American single-parent household. Additionally, the coach serves as a father figure to the five young men throughout the documentary. According to McDougal III and George III (2016), social fathering is a crucial component of the African American family experience and deserves more study:

Social fathers are non-biological parents who sometimes provide instrumental or socioemotional support or both to children and families. Although social fathers impact the well-being of Black children, they have been under-researched in the social science literature. This limitation prevents their voices from being heard, and it restricts service providers' abilities to engage them as effectively as they could in various social institutional arenas. (p. 526)

In addition to his family, Coach Dru indeed represents the characteristics of a social father to his players. The Salvation Army on Maple Street in Akron, Ohio, which shows up at the film's beginning, was the starting point of the coach's association with his young basketball players. That group included the young man who eventually became one of the premier athletes in American sports history, LeBron James. The team led by Coach Dru travels around the country in a minivan, playing the other best teams in the United States. Known as the Ohio Shooting Stars, the team included Willie McGee, LeBron James, Sian Cotton, and coach Joyce's son, Dru Joyce III. The Akron community again plays a significant role in assisting this team travels around the country. Coach Joyce talks about selling duct tape and having community fish fries, enabling the team to drive cross country in the van. His example as a role model and mentor is more than just a coach throughout the film as he advises these young men on the importance of education and persistence. McDougal III and George III (2016) analyzed a sample of 24 African American males involved in assisting in parenting biological sons/daughters between the ages of 3 and 21. They described one of the results gleaned from the research:

These fathers explain that they felt that the children needed male figures in their lives. They saw themselves as filling a void, described as a lack of positive male involvement. Some of the fathers explicitly mentioned Black children's need for a positive Black male role model. (p. 532)

We would contend that Coach Joyce fills this role as a mentor to these young men. At the beginning of the documentary, the audience is provided a history of the players, including their connection to Coach Joyce and their link to the Salvation Army on Maple Street. It's the location where they practice and become a team, but most importantly, it's primarily where they establish their friendships. It is Coach Dru who introduces the viewing audience to the team. First, he discusses his son, Dru Joyce III, whom the other teammates affectionally call Little Dru. He is given this nickname

because he is much shorter than the others, barely five feet tall. Second, we are introduced to Sian Cotton, who is both tall and rotund. It is revealed that his father was a star basketball player in the Akron area in the 1970s. Coach Dru says the following about Sian, "Sian was big, but he really wasn't good" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). The next player discussed is Willie McGee, who at the time, was considered the best player in the city (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). Finally, we meet a young LeBron James, who is described as having a callous life, growing up in inner-city Akron, Ohio, with his mother, Gloria.

As the group becomes more cohesive, the chemistry builds both on and off the court. The following quotes delivered by one of the four members reinforce the close-knit relationships within the group. First, Sian says, "We had a natural feel for each other. We had a chemistry for each other" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). This is an important quote, as the term "we" is emphasized twice within these two sentences. Sian again is quoted as saying, "It was basketball, but it was more friendship than anything" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). Another Sian quote emphasizes the bond when he says, "We were all strangers, and we bonded. The Fab Four... that was our identity" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). Next, the directors include old video clips of sleepovers and hotel parties where the friends have fun and swim in a pool together. It displays a friendship of African American males not often shown in sports documentaries. Two other Sian quotes solidify this interconnection between the friends. First, Sian says, "The team is like a family; you play your heart out for your family." He follows with another significant quote describing the rapport, adding, "Our friendship off the court was the same as it was on the court" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). This cohesion, especially the close interpersonal relationships between African American males, makes this an added addition to the genre of documentary filmmaking.

Communication of intimacy in sports is often discouraged, especially between males. In his analysis of masculinity in pickup basketball games, Rogers (2019) noted, "Physical strength, aggression, stoicism, and conspicuous heterosexuality are defining characteristics of manhood in the cultural imagination. Traditionally, a man's deviance from these norms has made him an object of pity, disgust, and ridicule" (p. 732). In this documentary, these young men tended to embrace their close interpersonal male relationships established within the environment of the team. Various researchers purport that sports have become the realm of masculine expression (Kimmel, 2008; Messner, 2002). Bowman (2009) indicated it even extends to the words used, stating, "Intimate is a term that most American men are reticent to use describing their same-sex friendships" (p. 216). Some perceive this type of intimacy as feminine or gay (Cohler & Smith, 2006; Fehr, 2004; Prager & Roberts, 2004). Throughout the film, the process of humanizing the athletes and emphasizing the love shared between these heterosexual men is another paradigm-shifting activity in African American documentary filmmaking.

The film follows the youth team as they go to California in 1999 to play nationally ranked teams. The Ohio Shooting Stars make it to the championship game but lose. Future NBA star LeBron James misses the last shot, which would have gained them a victory. This is not an essential part of the documentary, but it becomes necessary to stay together or become separated by going to different high schools. The two Akron schools to choose from included the predominately African American inner-city high school, Buchtel High School, or the predominately White parochial high school, St. Vincent-St. Mary. Coach Dru at the time was on the staff at Buchtel High School. In the film, Coach

Dru says, "If you were an inner-city kid, you went to Akron Buchtel. We were seen as pimping our talents for a white high school" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). The catalyst for a decision occurs when the Buchtel coaches tell Dru Joyce III that he is too small to play basketball for their school. All four individuals decide to stay together as a team and attend the same high school... St. Vincent-St. Mary. It is said in the documentary; they chose friendship over race.

As they begin their basketball careers at this high school, they are coached by a past college coach, Keith Dambrot. He was a controversial pick because of his past rhetoric when the coach at Central Michigan University. Adelson (2013) described one incident:

Twenty years ago, the head basketball coach at Central Michigan University stood in front of his players and asked permission to use a racial slur. The players agreed to the request from their coach, who is white. Keith Dambrot was trying to speak to the athletes with language they often used in the locker room among themselves, and he proceeded to call some of them the n-word. He didn't mean it in a derogatory sense, but in a motivational sense. An n-word in this context was a good thing, something to aspire to. It meant a hard worker, a fearless athlete. Dambrot called some of the players the n-word and other players half n-word; he wanted them all to rise to the same high level, which he labeled as the n-word. (para. 1-3)

Dambrot, a graduate of the University of Akron, is given a second chance to regain his reputation in the coaching profession. In the documentary, the players say Dambrot is very tough as a coach, and he runs practices as if he were coaching a college team. Coach Dru becomes the team's assistant coach. In 1999, all started as freshmen and won the Ohio State Basketball Championship with a 27-0. In Dambrot's second season, the team wins another state championship (Cohen, 2018). Even though Dambrot is White, he plays a significant role in the early growth of LeBron James as a basketball player. Years later, Cohen (2018) quoted James as he expressed his appreciation for Dambrot before the start of an NBA season:

If you would've asked me what my relationship would be with my first high-school coach when I was in the ninth grade, I would have told you it would've been terrible because he cussed us out every single day in practice. But our relationship grew more and more, and he ended up being probably the best coach I ever played for, Keith Dambrot; I love you. (para. 10-11)

After the two-state championships, Dambrot was hired by the University of Akron as their head basketball coach. He has a very successful career there and is the current head basketball coach at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The players are upset when Dambrot leaves for the University of Akron, but the school decides to promote Dru Joyce II as their new head coach. When Coach Dru led the Ohio Shooting Stars, he again was given a chance to be a role model to these young men. Joyce expounds on the importance of his role when he says, "I grew up in humble beginnings. What have I done that really matters?" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). It was one of his dreams to coach his son and these young men he acknowledges as his surrogate sons.

Even though LeBron James is not the documentary's focus, his presence and star power provide the media a spectacle to study at the start of the 21st century. So, the public wants to see him play that his high school games are moved to the larger James A. Rhodes basketball arena at the University of Akron.

The team also plays at Gund Arena, the NBA's professional basketball team, the Cleveland Cavaliers. James is featured on the cover of the February 18, 2002 issue of Sports Illustrated. He became the

first high school athlete on the magazine's cover in 36 years (Wahl, 2002). The Fighting Irish are nationally ranked and play the best teams from other states, a rarity in high school basketball. The talented team led by James is winning games by 50 points. However, as the documentary moves through the 2002 season, players become cocky and unfocused, not preparing correctly for upcoming games. The lack of focus and preparation becomes evident when the team loses as heavy favorites in the Ohio state championship game to Roger Bacon High School from Cincinnati. The Spartans 71-63 victory over the nearly unbeatable St. Vincent-St. Mary's team in 2002 is still one of the most talked-about games in Cincinnati preps sports history and represented the only loss to an Ohio team in LeBron's high school career (Noble, 2016). The loss impacted the team, but it negatively impacted the perception the media had of the coaching prowess of Coach Dru.

As the documentary moves into the 2002-2003 season, which is the final season for the group to be together, we begin to learn more about some of the family upbringings of the team members. However, a person not mentioned is Romeo Travis, who the other team members don't initially like or accept into their intimate friend network. Sian describes Romeo as, "He was funny, but he was so selfish." (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). Romeo is very standoffish and views the group as kind of a feminine friend group. He describes the others by saying, "They were like girls, they were always sharing" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). Since the field of men's sports is seen as one in which masculine expression is exhibited, it makes sense that Romeo shares his negative emotions about how the group self-disclosed, especially in his reference to them as girls. According to Shimanoff (2009), "Gender role theory is grounded in the supposition that individuals socially identified as males and females tend to occupy different ascribed roles within social structures and tend to be judged against divergent expectations for how they ought to behave" (p. 434). In this sense, Romeo feels they are acting more feminine than masculine, which moves outside of the template established for male interpersonal relationships.

This documentary is a paradigm-shifting film because of the close relationships between the five friends, with the addition of Romeo as the movie moves forward. The film signifies the close fathering relationship between Coach Dru and the young men, including his son, and emphasizes another fatherly relationship between Willie McGee and his brother. Willie was raised in Chicago, but he joined his married brother in Akron with his parents dealing with drug addictions at age nine. The documentary shows his brother serving as a father figure to Willie, providing for his basic needs of food, housing, and clothing, but most importantly, giving love and guidance. The documentary is significant in that African American men are given a prominent role in the film. Their responses and strong character serve to negate many of the negative stereotypes assigned to them.

Another part of the documentary discusses the challenges LeBron James faced growing up in dangerous living conditions in Akron, especially crime and violence. The film also highlights the role of strong African American females. In this case, LeBron James's mother, Gloria, represents strength and grace during troubling times. The documentary includes a segment with James and his mother filmed in one of the Akron apartments he grew up in. The conversation on the issues faced by this family is very enlightening. In one segment, James says, "My Mom was 16 when I was born." (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). The filmmaker's decision to add Gloria James and her story to the film's narrative is compelling and lends insight into the background of the future NBA star. Gloria describes his younger years by saying, "He didn't have a normal childhood. We lived in some of the

worst projects in town" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). James also points out that his father was absent from his life. This could suggest the concept of another negative portrayal of African American male role modeling. Still, James doesn't address his father's absence as a negative, instead emphasizing the impact of his mother on his life. James contends, "I already have my father and mother tied up in one, and that is Gloria James. At this point, I don't need nobody else" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). The film also recognizes the importance of a robust female role model, as exemplified by Gloria James. In including one of the apartments in the video, including a tour of LeBron's bedroom at the time, the documentary filmmakers allow viewers to see for themselves a representative sample of life for Gloria and LeBron before he made it big.

Of note is the fact that although all his teammates featured in the film had both parents, or in Willie's case, his brother and wife essentially serving as his parents, all the team members regularly enjoyed visiting the James residence. James says, "All my friends had houses, but their parents are dropping them off here" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). This activity could suggest that even a single-parent female African American home represented a place of love and cohesion for a team that cared for and respected each other.

Conclusion

As the documentary moves towards closure, the team wins the national championship and is considered one of the greatest high school teams of all time (LeBronjames.com). However, basketball is just one of the sustaining elements linking the group. Friendship and love are abundant in the film and form the centerpiece of this powerful documentary. During the team's senior night in 2003, an example of this is on their home floor at St. Vincent-St. Mary, LeBron's name, is announced, and he walks out to be recognized with his mother. After this ritual is completed, the remaining five friends walk out together with arms crossed, displaying all their love and commitment to one another. It is an inspiring visual image.

The appreciation and warmth the players feel for Coach Dru are also made evident. James describes his impact on the team by saying, "Coach was a big part of the puzzle" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). The love and respect they have for their mentor are made clear in their reactions and comments. It is mentioned they looked at the coach as a father figure in their lives. Therefore, this film segment solidifies that a different narrative is being constructed about African American male father figures and indicates that films presented responsibly can be groundbreaking for shattering racial taboos embedded in mainstream media. In an emotional moment, Coach Dru describes the importance to him of his relationship with this young group of players, stating, "I love them all like they are my sons. God gave me an opportunity to be involved with this. It was more than basketball. I needed to help them become men" (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009). Specifically, Coach Dru was highly successful in mentoring these young players into adulthood.

The documentary provides updates on all the players after high school and their advice after their playing careers. Willie received his bachelor's degree in computer science at Fairmont State University. Sian earned a football scholarship to Ohio State University. Dru Joyce III and Romeo received athletic scholarships to the University of Akron, played under their former head coach, Keith Dambrot, and graduated with bachelor's degrees. LeBron James has become one of the most decorated players in the history of professional basketball. Finally, Coach Dru continued coaching and impacted the lives of young players' new crops (Mason, Jr., et al., 2009).

In the years since the documentary, the individuals have continued their journeys of success. Willie returned to the Akron area and has held several influential positions in the community. Sian is now a rapper who even got LeBron to contribute to one song. Dru Joyce III and Romeo continued to play basketball successfully overseas, and LeBron won four NBA titles, including the first-ever for the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2016 (Zellman, 2017). Coach Dru continues to coach successfully and, in 2015, published a book entitled *Beyond Championships: A Playbook for Winning at Life* (Bembry, 2018; Connors, 2015).

This film moves beyond the typical recognition of physical skills. Instead, it humanizes the close interpersonal relationships of these young men, which other sports documentaries, including the ones mentioned earlier in the chapter, fail to do. While the film acknowledges that basketball is one-way athletes can move beyond their current circumstances, education is also essential. Few high school stars can eventually make it to the highest levels of their sport, but as stressed by Coach Dru, basketball can open doors and help pave the way to future success. Carrington (2010) expounded on the importance of sports documentaries, stating:

Sports have historically provided an opportunity for blacks throughout the African diaspora to gain recognition through physical struggle not just for their sporting achievement in the narrow and obvious sense but more significantly and fundamentally for their humanity" (p. 5).

This documentary attempts to debunk some of the myths accorded to African American men, basketball players, and even mothers to show this cultural community's wide range of possibilities. Future sports documentaries need to follow the paradigm established by *More Than a Game*. This is an important film because the stereotypes and the media stigmatization of the African American male become obsolete. The subject is treated like any other mainstream sports documentaries, not negating race but showing the communication intricacies of African American males and role modeling. Also, future research should continue to study the significance of African American sports cultures and representations. More than just contradicting negative stereotypes, sports texts which show the African American male as more than just an athlete, but also reveal the close interpersonal relationships between players and coaches, may indicate a differing and positive alternative to the simplistic categorizations and labeling that often seem prevalent in the media and society. Filmmakers must consider approaches like those taken in *More Than a Game*, which allow a fuller, richer, and complete consideration of the individual characteristics, relationships, and circumstances in which subjects negotiate with life's challenges.

References

- Adelson, E. (2013, November 11). One coach paid a heavy price for the use of racial slur in a way Richie Incognito admitted to in the interview. Retrieved from <https://sports.yahoo.com/news/nfl--one-coachpaid-heavy-price-for-use-of-racial-slur-in-same-manner-richie-incognito-admitted-to-in-interview044807898.html>
- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Anderson, L. C., & Raney, A. A. (2017). Exploring the relationship between sports fandom and the black criminal stereotype. *Communication & Sport*, 6(3), 263-282.

- Angelini, J. R., & Billings, A. C. (2010). Accounting for athletic performance: Race and sportscaster dialogue in NBC's 2008 summer Olympic telecast. *Communication Research Reports*, 27(1), 1-10.
- Bembry, J. (2018, April 27). Dru Joyce, LeBron's high school coach, is building his own legacy in Akron.
- Retrieved January 29, 2020, from <https://theundefeated.com/features/dru-joyce-LeBrons-high-school-coach-isbuilding-his-own-legacy-in-Akron/>
- Billings, A. C. (2003). Portraying Tiger Woods: Characterizations of a "black" athlete in a "white" sport. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 14(1), 29-38.
- Billings, A. C., & Eastman, S. T. (2002). Selective representation of gender, ethnicity, and nationality in American television coverage of the 2000 Summer Olympics. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 37(3-4), 351– 370.
- Billings, A. C., Halone, K. K., & Denham, B. E. (2002). "Man, that was a pretty shot": An analysis of gendered broadcast commentary surrounding the 2000 men's and women's NCAA final four basketball championships. *Mass Communication & Society*, 5(3), 295–315.
- Bowman, J. M. (2009). The influences of attribution, context, and heterosexual self-presentation on the perceived appropriateness of self-disclosure in same-sex male friendships. *Communication Research Reports*, 26(3), 215-227.
- Brame, R., Bushway, S. D., Paternoster, R., & Turner, M. G. (2014). Demographic patterns of cumulative arrest prevalence by ages 18 and 23. *Crime & Delinquency*, 60(3), 471-486.
- Carrington, B. (2010). *Race, Sport, and politics: The sporting black diaspora*. New York: Sage.
- Cohen, B. (2018, November 20). How LeBron James gave his first coach a second chance. Retrieved from www.wallstreetjournal.com.
- Cohler, B. J., & Smith, G. D. (2006). The dilemma of masculinity and culture. In V. H. Bedford & B. F. Turner (Eds.) *Men in relationships: A new look from a life course perspective* (pp. 3-25). New York: Springer.
- Connors, J. (2015, January 15). LeBron writes foreword to new book by his coach and mentor, Dru Joyce II. Retrieved from https://www.cleveland.com/books/2015/01/LeBron_writes_forward_to_new_b.html
- Curry, T. J. (2017). *The man-not: Race, class, genre, and the dilemmas of black manhood*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- Ebert, R. (1994, October 21). Hoop Dreams. Retrieved from <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hoopdreams-1994>
- Dixon, T. (2006). Psychological reactions to crime news portrayals of black criminals: Understanding the moderating roles of prior news viewing and stereotype endorsement. *Communication Monographs*, 73(2), 162-187. doi: 10.1080/03637750600690643
- Dixon, T. L., & Maddox, K. B. (2005). Skin tone, crime news, and social reality judgments: Priming the stereotype of the dark and dangerous black criminal. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 35(8), 1555-1570. doi: 10.1111/j.1559-1816.2005.tb02184.x
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1899). *The Philadelphia negro: A social study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Eastman, S. T., & Billings, A. C. (2001). Biased voices of sports: Racial and gender stereotyping in college basketball announcing. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 12(4), 183-201.
- Fehr, B. (2004). Intimacy expectations in same-sex friendships: A prototype interaction–pattern model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 265-284. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.265
- Gardner, D. (Producer), & Foster, L. (Director). (1997). *Soul in the hole* [Motion picture]. USA: Asphalt Films.
- Glassner, B. (2009). *The culture of fear: Why Americans are afraid of the wrong things: Crime, drugs, minorities, teen moms, killer kids, mutant microbes, plane crashes, road rage, & so much more*. New York: Basic Books.
- Grainger, A., Newman, J., & Andrews, D. (2006). Sport, the media, and the construction of race. In A. A. Raney, & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Handbook of sports and media* (pp. 447-468). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- James, S., Gilbert, P., & Marx, F. (Producers), & James, S. (Director). (1994). *Hoop Dreams* [Motion picture]. USA: Kartemquin Films.
- Joyce, D. (2018, March 25). Tweet. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/coachdrujoyce/status/977917226262163457?lang=en>
- Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Klotman, P. R., & Cutler, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Struggles for representation: African American documentary film and video*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

- Livingston, G. (2018, April 27). About one-third of U.S. children are living with an unmarried parent. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/27/about-one-third-of-u-s-children-are-living-with-an-unmarried-parent/>
- Mason, Jr., H., Belman, K., & Mann, K. (Producers), & Belman, K. (Director). (2009). *More than a game* [Motion picture]. USA: Lionsgate.
- Mastro, D. E. (2003). A social identity approach to understanding the impact of television messages. *Communication Monographs*, 70(2), 98–113.
- Mastro, D. E., Blecha, E., & Seate, A. A. (2011). Characterizations of criminal athletes: A systematic examination of sports news depictions of race and crime. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 55(4), 526–542. doi: 10.1080/08838151.2011.620664
- Mastro, D. E., & Kopacz, M. (2006). Media representations of race, prototypicality, and policy reasoning: An application of self-categorization theory. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(2), 305–322. doi: 10.1207/s15506878jobem5002_8
- McDonald, I. (2007). Situating the sport documentary. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 31(3), 208–225. doi: 10.1177/0193723507304608
- McDougal III, S., & George III, C. (2016). "I wanted to return the favor": The experiences and perspectives of black social fathers. *Journal of Black Studies*, 47(6), 524–549. doi: 10.1177/0021934716653346
- Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the field: Women, men, and sports*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nichols, B. (1992). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press
- Noble, G. (2016). From the vault: Roger Bacon beat LeBron James' team in the state championship game. Retrieved from <https://www.wcpo.com/news/our-community/from-the-vault/from-the-vaultcincinnati-roger-bacon-beats-LeBron-james-team-in-state-championship-game>
- Oliver, M. B., Hoewe, J., Ash, E., Kim, K., Chung, M., & Shade, D. (2014). Media and social groups. In M.B.
- Oliver & A. A. Raney (Eds.), *Media and social life* (pp. 81–97). New York: Routledge.
- Prager, K. J., & Roberts, L. J. (2004). Deep intimate connection: Self and intimacy in couple relationships. In D. J. Mashek & A. Aron (Eds.), *Handbook of closeness and intimacy* (pp. 43–60). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Richardson, S. (2019, June 13). Breaking myths about black fatherhood this Father's Day. The Chicago Reporter. Retrieved from <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/breaking-myths-about-black-fatherhood-this-fathersday/>
- Rogers, N. (2019). Holding court: The social regulation of masculinity in university pickup basketball. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 48(6), 731–749. doi: 10.1177/0891241619827369
- Rudrow, K. J. (2019). "I see death around the corner": Black manhood and vulnerability in MeAgainst the World. *Journal of Black Studies*, 50(7), 632–650. doi: 10.1177/0021934719875941
- Safaya, R. (2009, October 16). Kristopher Belman: *More than a game*. Retrieved from <http://cinemalogue.com/2009/10/16/mtag-interview-belman/>
- Sheppard, S. N. (2017). Historical contestants: African American documentary traditions in *On the Shoulders of Giants*. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 41(6), 462–477. doi: 10.1177/0193723517719667
- Shimanoff, S. B. (2009). Gender role theory. In S. W. Littlejohn & K. A. Foss (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*. New York: Sage.
- Wahl, G. (2002, February 18). Ahead of his class. Retrieved from <https://www.si.com/vault/2002/02/18/318739/ahead-of-his-class-ohio-high-school-junior-LeBronjames-is-so-good-that-hes-already-being-mentioned-as-the-heir-to-air-jordan>
- Zellman, B. (2017, August 3). Where are they now: LeBron's St. Vincent-St. Mary high school teammates. Retrieved from <https://www.clevescene.com/scene-and-heard/archives/2017/08/03/where-are-theynow-LeBron's-st-vincent-st-mary-high-school-teammates>