

Student Perspective

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I entered that classroom on that very first Wednesday night of “Diversity and Social Issues in Sport” class on January 13, 2016 thinking that I knew exactly who I was. The truth was that after taking that class every Wednesday night from January 13th to April 29th of 2016, I left a transformed person. Candidly, at the start, I was just the girl sitting in the dead last seat of a rather large classroom, fuming over the dreaded alphabetic order mandating that I be stuck in what felt like a different area code, and who dared to argue during the class’s first meeting. Albeit the argument was presented in a shaky tone with trembling hands, I unleashed my rather passionate tangent about athletes using their platforms in order to promulgate social change rather than to sell out BeastMode™ merchandise. I was unequivocally unaware of how the profound clout of a class designed around four seemingly common themes -respect, equality, diversity, and inclusion- would individually and collectively affect myself, my classmates, and my professor. The course confronted difficult, deep-rooted issues such as gender, race relations, civil rights, dead-locked class systems, and religion. It also forced every one of us to deconstruct a controversial topic from all stances while allowing us the freedom and privilege to have intelligent discussion and discourse amongst one another. In a world dominated by digital screens and superfluous likes that allow anyone with a Facebook membership to become the judge, jury, investigator, and executioner on any and every topic, “Diversity and Social Issues in Sport” embodied the very definition of Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis/Intergroup Contact Theory. This theory allowed us to blur color lines, not by ignoring its blatant existence, but by facing the issue head on and collaborating together on how consequential progress can be attained. My favorite lectures confronted gender with respect to sport and the dialogue that followed. We juxtaposed a female who was forced to play softball rather than baseball, determined solely by anatomical design, to that of an African-American quarterback being coerced to switch positions, creating the phenomenon of racial stacking.

Inclusion is qualitative whereas diversity is quantitative. Knowing this fact influences why I feel studies that attempt to accurately quantify inclusion or depict the quality of a diversity course fall short of recognizing their possibilities and fail to neither value nor measure the interdependence of the illusive element of inclusion within a diverse atmosphere. Between staggering statistics, such as over the history of the Nobel Peace Prize the award recipients consist of 49 women versus 825 men, to the subtle subliminal messages that the New York Giants sent with their 2016 NFL schedule referring to a certain infamous team by their city (Washington) rather than by their tendentious team name (Redskins), it is indisputable that we have neither reached a plateau of equality nor have the slightest glimpse at a post-bigotry world despite duly noted achievements.

On the year celebrating the eightieth anniversary of Jesse Owens’ monumental feat of taking home four Olympic gold medals, Dr. Harrison organized a field trip to a local movie theatre where we viewed the film, *Race*, as a class. To experience such a stirring movie portraying Jesse Owens, Marty Glickman, and Sam Stoller’s plight at the 1936 Olympics, with the melting pot of

individuals that held conversations considered the farthest thing from being “politically correct” yet were respectful, honest, and thought provoking, was truly an overwhelmingly powerful event.

I have a dream that one day I will live in a nation that eliminates alienation by replacing a racial/ethnicity box with a single category labeled human, that we practice love as our religion, and that character will be valued over color. That we will foster an environment where it is as nonchalant to have a meeting with a Caesars Entertainment Corporation executive board comprised entirely of women of all racial backgrounds as it is with any of the 23 other Fortune 500 companies with all-male boards, where Title IX stands for more than a legislative nuisance some colleges would rather ignore than enact, and that a gender pay gap is nothing more than a relic of America’s past challenges. A nation where Rooney Rules are implemented at all levels of sport for the sole purpose of filling positions with the best possible candidates; where police brutality and systemically institutionalized racist behavior and conduct is not ratified as the repercussions of “a few bad apples” but addressed and adjudicated for and by a government that is the result of a revolution driven by criminal justice.

In *Sport Matters: Leadership, Power, and the Quest for Respect in Sports*, Shropshire (2015) eloquently summarizes his proposed progress in contrast to the concept of change: “Change is undeniable, but problems continue, and those problems- the challenges we face both in and out of sports- only grow more difficult over time and real progress is not allowed to take hold” (p.15). Notwithstanding the great strides society has taken towards equality and the sacrifices made by mainstream allies, athletes, professors, and the masses that fought on the quest for equal opportunities, we must refuse to be complacent and still contest the obstacles standing between us and the inalienable progress necessary. We must not be content with resting on the haunches of the “illusion of inclusion” (Shropshire,2015, p. 26), but relentlessly exhort on, shattering glass ceilings, combatting diversity antigens such as microaggressions and prejudices rooted in fear of the unknown, and create educational material from elementary school to doctorate coursework that facilitate diversity and effectuate inclusion. We must mow down grass ceilings, develop innovative techniques to harness the power of social media to drive positive change, and rise above self-limiting behavior that threatens to restrict our potential.

Quarantined inside classroom 0105, the course became infectious, spilling over into multiple conversations daily with just about anyone. After all, who doesn’t enjoy debating whether or not the judicial system discriminates against those of lower socioeconomic classes or indigenous people at Sunday brunch? However, beginning a dialogue is unerringly just words without action, mere figments of the imagination and, as Vincent Van Gogh efficaciously articulated, “What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?” The need to stay vigilant on the march towards an enlightened society has never been more paramount. But I remain optimistic due to the fact that I stand beside the altruistic heroes of a not so distant future, like the millennials that sat alongside me in *Diversity and Social Issues in Sport*”, my incredible professors in the Minor That’s Major, the courageous athletes of the New York Liberty, Phoenix Mercury and Indiana Fever, Dwayne Wade, Dr. Thaddeus Rivers, Chris Paul, Megan Rapinoe, LeBron James, Serena Williams, Carmelo Anthony, and countless other pioneers who navigate the way to trailblazing a cultural change.

References

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