



Living Through the Hoop

Douglas Hartmann³

Living Through the Hoop: High School Basketball, Race, and the American Dream. Reuben A. Buford May. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

For some time now, Americans have been fascinated with the culture of basketball among African-American boys and young men. Think of Hollywood blockbusters such as *They Got Game* or *Above the Rim*, Rick Telander's recently rereleased underground classic *Heaven Is a Playground*, or *Hoop Dreams*, one of the most popular and critically acclaimed independent documentaries of all time. Although sociologists of sport have made numerous contributions to our understandings of basketball and race in the past two decades, they have tended to focus more on elite, collegiate, and professional venues, media coverage and commentary, and resulting popular perceptions and ideologies. All this work is from a critical perspective that believes sport contributes to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and that young black men are overinvested in their athletic dreams. Thus, *Living Through the Hoop*, Reuben May's grounded, grass-roots ethnography of an African-American high school basketball team, is a welcome addition to the literature.

Although he has spent much of his life in and around basketball, May's previous scholarship has not dealt explicitly with sports. This is, for the most part, a virtue. A seasoned observer of race, black culture, and everyday American life (his first book, also published by NYU, was on conversations about race in an African-American bar), May writes in clear and straightforward prose, has an eye for the revealing detail, as well as the knack for weaving stories and anecdotes into compelling insight and analysis. Chapters on topics ranging from drugs, drinking, and delinquency to masculinity to sportsmanship and competition take us into the world of young African-American basketball players, helping us to better understand the social milieu in which they and their basketball passions are embedded as well as what it all means to them. As a sociological analyst working from the inside, May avoids the one-sided critiques so typical of the field and produces a uniquely balanced, nuanced understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of sports participation for African Americans, reminding us that the drawbacks have more to do with racism and limited opportunities in society at large than with the sports world itself.

Certain aspects of the book would look different in the hands of other scholars. May has a tendency to indulge personal experiences and case idiosyncrasies that do not appear central to the analytical core of the project (e.g., his head coach's "no-cut policy"), and there are places (such as the section on

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how opposing fans used the N word) where the voices of the players themselves could have been more prominent. Also, the chapter on masculinity would have benefited from a closer engagement with existing scholarship on the topic. For May, masculinity is equated mainly with sexuality and relationships with girls and women. However, as scholars such as Richard Majors, Mike Messner, Don Sabo, and Ben Carrington have discussed, in sport it signals a much broader set of issues and problems, encompassing physicality, presentation of self, competition/domination, and dealing with pain.

These qualms and quibbles may reflect the obsessions of a specialist more than the interests of the general readership May is clearly aiming for and has, in fact, begun to reach. *Living Through the Hoop* has already won one sociology award, and I won't be surprised if others follow. This is a more important point than may first meet the eye, even for specialists.

After several decades of exceptional work on race and a host of other topics, sport scholarship—in sociology as well as in a number of related disciplines—has now achieved a rather impressive level of maturity, range, and sophistication. Reuben May, it seems to me, is one of those writers and thinkers who could help bring this body of work to broader visibility and influence, in both public and scholarly circles. More than that, May may be able to synthesize and consolidate these gains and, in doing so, not only contribute to the continued development of sport sociology, but also show how the study of sport can enrich our understandings of modern society and maybe even of sociology itself. A tall order, perhaps, but one occasioned by a very good piece of work.

Asian Americans in Class

Vivian Louie⁴

Asian Americans in Class: Charting the Achievement Gap Among Korean American Youth. *Jamie Lew*. New York: Teacher's College Press. 2005.

Scholarly and media reports of post-1960s immigration to the United States have painted a familiar scenario: some working-class immigrant groups are able to use ethnic social capital to overcome their structural disadvantages and guide their children up the mobility ladder. Jamie Lew's well-written book richly complicates this oversimplified narrative of social capital, immigration, and social mobility with an incisive analysis of the achievement gap among Korean-American youth. Lew's analysis examines the youths' educational experiences vis-à-vis the immigrant family, co-ethnic community, and school contexts.

In the book, Lew draws primarily from interviews conducted with 72 Korean-American youth aged 14 to 20, with 42 attending "an elite magnet

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