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# Rush Limbaugh, Donovan McNabb, and “A Little Social Concern”

## Reflections on the Problems of Whiteness in Contemporary American Sport

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This article offers an interpretative case study of the controversy that surrounded Rush Limbaugh's comments about Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb near the beginning of the 2003 National Football League season. Informed by critical race theory, the analysis argues that Limbaugh's remarks were a textbook example of how the rhetoric of Whiteness operates to assert the cultural normativity of the dominant group and legitimate its privilege. That sport leaders and commentators roundly rejected Limbaugh's comments and pushed for his removal gives the impression that the sporting establishment was unusually progressive and enlightened on these issues. However, closer reading and basic content analysis suggests that the ideas mobilized to put Limbaugh in his place—specifically those involving the supposed sanctity and colorblindness of sport—were in many ways complicit with Limbaugh's own White supremacy. Consideration of the market forces that allowed Limbaugh's hiring implicates sport even further. Lessons for Whiteness theory, White supremacy, and the relationships between them are discussed.

**Keywords:** *sport culture; Whiteness studies; colorblindness; critical race theory*

### The Episode

In the pantheon of incidents, issues, and individuals called to mind in the context of Whiteness and White supremacy in contemporary American sport, few are as widely recognized and seemingly apropos as the drama that involved Rush Limbaugh's comments involving Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb early in the 2003 National Football League (NFL) season.

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On Sunday, September 28, 2003, just a few weeks into the conservative radio talk show host's new gig as a studio commentator on ESPN's *NFL Countdown*, Limbaugh offered this contribution to a panel discussion of the early season struggles of the Eagles and their quarterback:

Sorry to say this, I don't think he's been that good from the get-go. . . . What we have here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a Black quarterback can do well—Black coaches and Black quarterbacks doing well. . . . There's a little hope invested in McNabb, and he got credit for the performance of his team that he didn't deserve. The defense [has] carried this team.<sup>1</sup>

No one in the studio pushed Limbaugh to elaborate or defend his claims. However, when told of Limbaugh's comments, McNabb himself had this to say: "It's somewhat shocking to hear that on national TV from him. It's not something I can sit here and say won't bother me." The racial aspects of the criticisms were what bothered McNabb. "It's sad that you've got to go to skin color. I thought we were through with that whole deal." Later in the week, McNabb worried that Limbaugh's comments might discourage young African Americans from wanting to play quarterback, on the grounds that they might "be looked down upon because of the color of [their] skin."<sup>2</sup>

McNabb's response touched off a national firestorm of controversy and critical commentary. Many were quick to recall Limbaugh's past record of inflammatory racial remarks and anti-Black attitudes—"who cares about [African Americans]," he once famously said in what was perhaps the most widely cited quote, "they're only 12% of the population." The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) characterized Limbaugh's comments as "both bigoted and ignorant" and called for Limbaugh to be fired, or at least for the network to provide an opposing point of view. In the middle of the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, several candidates took up the mantle and vied for the most compelling sound bite: Wesley Clark characterized the remarks as "hateful and ignorant speech," Howard Dean called them "absurd and offensive," and the Reverend Al Sharpton announced that later in the week he would hold a news conference in front of ABC headquarters in New York where he would call for a national boycott of the network if Limbaugh wasn't released. (ABC and ESPN are corporate cousins, both owned by Walt Disney Company.) As these and other comments made their rounds, sports reporters, columnists, and other writers all across the country began to solicit comments and reactions from players and weigh in with their criticisms.<sup>3</sup>

Not even the NFL was happy about this publicity. Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie characterized Limbaugh's remarks as "despicable" and spoke of the "institutional racism" of the network and its executives. And Joe Browne, the league's executive vice president of communications and public affairs, released an official statement that put the blame as much on the network as on Limbaugh himself: "Donovan's stature as a top quarterback reflects his performance on the field, not the desire of

the media. . . . ESPN knew what they were getting when they hired Rush Limbaugh. ESPN selects its on-air talent, not the NFL."<sup>4</sup>

Having already been barraged with thousands of negative e-mail messages on the matter,<sup>5</sup> ESPN had to do something. They had *Countdown* anchor Chris Berman, whom the network described as a "self-described New England Democrat," hold a news conference. His main message was that he didn't think "Rush was malicious in intent or in tone." "As cut and dry as it seems in print," ESPN's star announcer explained, "I didn't think so when it went by my ears." Berman went on to say that the network was sorry to have upset McNabb "in the middle of his travails" and reiterated that he didn't think Limbaugh's comment "was meant the way it came out. I don't think that defines the way Rush feels about people." Limbaugh himself had a similar message on his nationally syndicated radio talk show on Wednesday. "My comments this past Sunday were directed at the media and were not racially motivated." "This is such a mountain out of a mole hill," he told his listeners. "There's no racism here. There's no racist intent whatsoever."<sup>6</sup>

But the damage was done. Behind-the-scenes talks between Limbaugh and ESPN about an exit strategy began on Wednesday morning, October 1. By the end of the day, Limbaugh had announced his resignation via his Web site. While still insisting that his comments were directed only at the media and not racially motivated, he acknowledged:

I offered an opinion . . . [which] has caused discomfort to the crew, which I regret. I love NFL Sunday Countdown and do not want to be a distraction to the great work done by all who work on it. Therefore, I have decided to resign.

ESPN and ABC sports president George Brodenheimer had this to say: "We accept his resignation and regret the circumstances surrounding this. We believe that he took the appropriate action to resolve this matter expeditiously."<sup>7</sup> The following day (Thursday), in a previously scheduled appearance in front of the National Press Association, however, Limbaugh reiterated his previous claims and mused: "All of this has become the tempest that it is because I must have been right about something. If I wasn't right, there wouldn't be this cacophony of outrage that has sprung up in the sportswriter community." In fact, Limbaugh was quoted in *Newsweek* magazine as saying: "I know I'm right. . . . I'm not going to retract anything."<sup>8</sup>

## The Working of Whiteness

On initial reflection, the lessons of this incident for our understanding of the relations between sport and race in American culture appear to be fairly clear and straightforward—and, perhaps more importantly, make the sport community look enlightened and progressive. When a popular African American athlete objects to the

racially inflammatory comments of a controversial political pundit turned sports analyst, the sports media and opinion makers rise to condemn the comments, the commentator, and his network as racist. In spite of the attempts of the offending parties to deny the racial intent of the remarks and downplay their anti-Black thrust, the opposition holds firm; in fact, public opinion in and around the sporting community hardens in support. The network is forced to take action and works out a deal where the commentator—albeit without repudiating his comments—resigns his post. Thus, the drama was quickly and decisively resolved in favor of what would seem to be the forces of racial progress.

The only real question, it would seem, is how the commentator (and his erstwhile network supporters) believed he could get away with insisting—repeatedly and with a straight face—that his remarks were neither racially motivated nor at all racist. And here, I believe, is the first lesson in how the erstwhile normativity of Whiteness typically operates to assert its authority and, by extension, to support and maintain White social supremacy.

Part of the explanation for Limbaugh's self-righteousness stems from the fact that his television commentary was not directed against McNabb personally. But Limbaugh also believed he was in the right. In the conservative pundit's worldview—which we must take seriously if we are to understand the cultural power of Whiteness and its relationship to structures of White supremacy—racial fairness is about treating individuals of all races exactly the same, judging each only on the basis of his or her merits and performances. Limbaugh believed his remarks about what he perceived to be the media's overly sympathetic assessment of McNabb were not only defensible but in fact virtuous—because they emanated from colorblind, individualistic values. Anything else, in this view, was actually its own version of racism, a classic case of reverse racism. Although Limbaugh did not use this phrase, there were those on his side who claimed that if racism was involved in this incident, it was in the denial of Limbaugh's right to criticize an African American if he believed the statistics and results warranted it.<sup>9</sup>

Here it is important to point out that Limbaugh was not lacking for evidence in support of his claim that McNabb—one of the most popular figures in the league as judged by jersey sales and the popularity of his Chunky Soup commercials—was overrated. McNabb's early season performance had not only failed to live up to his previous All-Pro standards, but the Eagle's signal caller actually had the lowest statistical rating of any quarterback in the league over the first 2 weeks of the season. Limbaugh was hardly the first critic to point this out. McNabb had long been subject to criticism from his (notoriously fickle) hometown media,<sup>10</sup> and that fall I heard an eminent sociologist present a statistical analysis of the performance of NFL quarterbacks over several seasons that was unable to definitely reject Limbaugh's claims (Walker, 2003). Moreover, a recent sociological study (Buffington, 2005) found that the rise of Black quarterbacks in the NFL tends to be celebrated in the media as a positive development, and some economists claimed that television audiences increased significantly if at least one

team started a Black quarterback (Vigdor, 2003). Indeed, race-critical sport scholars have been talking for at least a decade about the inordinate popularity of superstar, African American athletes such as Michael Jordan, what Michael Eric Dyson (1993) called the “pedagogy of desire” (for a fuller treatment, see Hartmann, 2006).

For all of its supposed evidence and logic, however, the shortcomings of Limbaugh’s colorblind appeal are both manifest and legion from a more critical, sociological perspective. Perhaps most obvious is the fundamental inability of an individualist, race-neutral perspective to grasp and grapple with persistent inequalities of race. A noble aspiration, colorblindness is far from an accurate description of the racial realities of the United States today—and this applies to sport as much as to society at large. Whether it involves stacking, differential treatment by coaches, management, league officials, or stereotypes in the media, sociological research has consistently demonstrated clear patterns of racial discrimination in sport (for a review, see Hartmann, 2000); and this is to say nothing of the disadvantaged social backgrounds and institutional barriers that many African American athletes have to overcome. Even the celebration of Black athletic success can take on troubling racial overtones and connotations. The same sport scholars who have detected a tendency to romanticize certain celebrity African American athletes have also documented that the media and American public turn on Black athletes quickly when shortcomings on or off the fields of competition are exposed (e.g., Cole & Andrews, 1996; Cole & Denny, 1994; see also Andrews, 1996).

In the absence of interviews or other behind-the-scenes data, it is impossible to say for sure just how conscious and strategic Limbaugh’s deployment of colorblind discourse and ideals was. But their impact on audiences and the general American public is well known among race scholars. Not only does colorblindness blind regular folks to existing racial injustices and inequalities, it can make it seem as if the existing racial status quo and White supremacy itself is acceptable. This legitimization function has led sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001; see also Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000) and others (Carr, 1997; Crenshaw, 1997) to argue that “colorblind racism” is the most pervasive and problematic racial discourse of the post-civil rights era.

And even if Limbaugh conceived of his initial remarks to be in defense of race-neutral values, this still begs the question of why he refused to explicitly defend his colorblind racial vision, instead hiding behind the claim that he was not talking about race at all. Even colorblindness, after all, is a vision of race and racial justice. The answer takes us deeper into the heart of Limbaugh’s Whiteness. Beyond its colorblind individualism, Limbaugh’s ideology and discourse were based in the comfortable assumption that his worldview and way of talking were simply true, so commonsensical and taken for granted that they didn’t need to be articulated or elaborated, much less defended. Such an assumption is made possible, as critical Whiteness scholars have analyzed in some detail (cf. Goldberg, 1993), both because Whites occupy a dominant social position and because of the abstract, universalist conceptions of knowledge and subjectivity that are associated with their liberal individualism.

Whiteness, in short, is a cultural vantage point so deeply privileged that it is able to disavow its own social location and cultural specificity. And it is precisely this normativity, this perceived universality and transcendence, that allowed Limbaugh, as Dave Roediger (2002) has commented on the pundit's ill-fated television show, to "walk the tightrope between the unspoken and the largely unspeakable" (p. 54).

Limbaugh's unacknowledged White normativity had additional social functions as well. Most basic, they placed the seemingly objective, disinterested White commentator in the position of being the ultimate arbiter of Black America. Limbaugh's comments not only put McNabb in his place (and conveniently forgot McNabb's previous seasons of earned merit on the gridiron), they resonated with the sense of victimization, outrage, resentment, and resurgent—if misplaced—pride of White racial projects. Whether intended or not, they reflected and reinforced a subtler, more entrenched resentment about the successes of African Americans both in sport and society in general. This is, of course, a difficult point to prove conclusively, but perhaps a counterexample will provide some empirical ballast. I am thinking here of Brett Favre, the much-celebrated quarterback of the Green Bay Packers. In recent years, Favre's performance decline has been both more obvious and precipitous than McNabb's was then or now. Yet Favre—who has refused to retire or have his playing time reduced (and this is not even to get into his one-time addiction to painkillers)—has not only escaped substantial or sustained criticism, he has actually been mythologized by the league and the media for his grit and determination. Furthermore, when the subject of retirement is brought up by disgruntled fans or commentators, Favre's desire to continue playing is defended on the grounds that he has "earned the right" to decide for himself by virtue of his previous accomplishments, which include leading the Packers to two Super Bowls in the 1990s. I do not know what Limbaugh thinks of Favre, but clearly he did not extend such an allowance for past performance to McNabb.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the more general point is that Limbaugh's Whiteness not only denied its own cultural biases and social location, it served to assert White privilege and dominance over African Americans—even in an arena where African Americans have made tremendous progress and enjoy a high degree of power and influence.

### Some Questions About Whiteness and the World of Sport

Of course, the real question for this analysis is whether the leaders and opinion makers of the sporting establishment realized and repudiated Limbaugh's Whiteness and its associated supremacist functions as might be inferred from the eventual and seemingly decisive resolution of the controversy he provoked. Several questions and factors complicate such a straightforward, heart-warming rendering of the sports community as a critic of Whiteness and its privileges.

For one thing, Limbaugh's rebuke did not come immediately. Not only did Limbaugh's in-studio colleagues—African American analysts Michael Irvin and

Tom Jackson among them—fail to register an on-air complaint, the national media didn't pick up the story until prompted by McNabb's observations and complaints. A LexisNexis search reveals that the articles and commentaries in the 2 days after Limbaugh's initial comments could be counted on one hand. The full barrage of public commentary and criticism didn't come until the end of the week (32 articles on Thursday, 48 on Friday), after Limbaugh had already resigned his position. If the sports world—or at least the NFL and its reporters and commentators—was (or is) so racially attuned and committed, why the hesitation?

And then there is the question of why Limbaugh—with his history of inflammatory racial opinions and remarks—was hired by ESPN in the first place. The *New York Times* was obsessed with “unanswered questions” how much network executives knew about Limbaugh's “record of racial commentary” when he was brought on. But the real mystery is how the network could have failed to consider the racial views of the most popular and controversial talk show host in the nation. The explicit justification provided by ESPN for the hiring was that Limbaugh was brought in to be “the voice of the fan,” the regular guy, the six-pack Joe—much as ABC had said of the hiring of Dennis Miller for *Monday Night Football* 2 years previously (a position for which Limbaugh himself had famously interviewed and campaigned).<sup>12</sup> This blatant disregard for the African American football fan may not constitute blatant, out-and-out racism (as Kimberle Crenshaw, 2003, charged); however, one must acknowledge that casting Limbaugh as the “everyman” of American sports fans clearly normalized and naturalized the Whiteness of the league's fan base and its cultural commonsense.

A third point has to do with the blunt label and accusations of racism leveraged against Limbaugh—a framing, not incidentally, that seems to have become story line for the incident in the collective memory of the sporting establishment.<sup>13</sup> Let me preface this point by reiterating that there is no doubt in my mind that Limbaugh's comments—which emanate from a normative position designed to privilege Whiteness, keep African Americans in their place, and maintain and legitimate the broader racial status quo—were racist in their social function if not their actual intent. In this respect, the sporting establishment got it right in castigating Limbaugh. However, in terms of their expressed rhetoric and underlying ideology, I think things are a bit more complicated. There are two reasons for this. One is that if Limbaugh's comments were indeed ideologically racist, it is a brand of racism that went well beyond the usual individualist, anti-Black sentiments of traditional, referential definitions of racism. Connected with this, branding Limbaugh (or anyone else, for that matter) as racist made it far too easy for the sporting establishment to absolve itself of the troubles and complications of race—much as the disavowal of the Holocaust allowed Europe to wash its hands of the other stains of race throughout the second half of the 20th century.

So the question now becomes twofold: (a) What, precisely, did the sporting establishment see as problematic about Limbaugh's comments? (b) And what does this tell us about the relationships among race, racism, Whiteness, and White supremacy in



contemporary American sport? To address these questions, I conducted a close reading and basic content analysis of the 44 commentaries preserved in the LexisNexis database on the episode written in the week immediately following Limbaugh's comments. I will turn to that analysis now. What is at stake here is less a matter of being politically correct (once again, in terms of a progressive racial politics, the sporting establishment was clearly on the right side in opposing Limbaugh) than it is of a proper understanding of the subtle and complicated ways in which race and Whiteness are implicated in the culture and practices of the American sporting establishment if not American society more generally.

### **The Perceived Problems With Limbaugh and the Problems With Those Perceptions**

The first and most obvious objection I anticipated, given the initial sound bites, was sportswriters and columnists who described Limbaugh and his comments as racist. And indeed there were some who took this line. One of them was Bob Raismann of the (New York) *Daily News*, who called Limbaugh, among other things, a "two-bit bigot." "Strip away all of Limbaugh's media mumbo-jumbo," Raismann insisted, "and what you have is someone who believes McNabb is an inadequate quarterback because he is black."<sup>14</sup> However, there were far fewer of this sort of accusation than might have expected. Only 6 of the 44 commentaries in the sample explicitly condemned Limbaugh for being racist, and 3 of these references came from columns penned by the *Daily News*'s Raismann.

The limited accusations of racism could have resulted from the fact that the sporting establishment did indeed possess a subtle, sophisticated understanding and critique of race and racism and Limbaugh's self-satisfied Whiteness. One might infer this, for example, from Lurie's somewhat cryptic mention of institutional racism or from the tantalizing, much-quoted comment offered by Eagles defensive end N. D. Kalu: "He speaks well. He's well-read. But he's an idiot. That's dangerous."<sup>15</sup> Somewhat in this vein, Thomas George, writing in the *New York Times*, used the incident to highlight ongoing racism in the league. "Among the black quarterbacks and the three black head coaches on the 32 NFL teams," George reported, "there is a definitive feeling that they are on shorter leashes than their white counterparts. For every push from the news media, they say, there is a blistering pull."<sup>16</sup> But very few writers went this route. Rather than delving into the subtleties and complexities of Limbaugh's White normative appeal and its perpetuation of White privilege, in fact, most critics had very little at all to say about race.

The most basic, nonracialist criticism was that Limbaugh was a sports novice who had no place commenting on football in the first place. At least a half dozen columnists made this problem their central theme, and many others made mention of it, often quoting Washington linebacker LaVar Arrington: "Who is Rush Limbaugh to make a

statement like that? He needs to stay in his area of expertise because he's out of it right now."<sup>17</sup>

One of the broader points for those who saw Limbaugh as somehow out of his element was that the sports world was simply not the proper place for Limbaugh's brand of commentary, that Limbaugh and his views were "too controversial" for the arena of sports. A half-dozen writers made this their primary thesis. Here, the point had less to do with Limbaugh's sports expertise (or lack thereof) and more to do with the fact that he was raising so-called controversial issues in an arena that many considered somehow special or sacred, above politics, either because it was a sacred cultural space or because it was an arena for entertainment pure and simple. It was the latter point that was made by a sportswriter out of West Virginia named Jason Martin:

That's why many skip to the sports page—to avoid the mindless jibber-jabber of political positioning and redundant self-promotion that plagues most of the rest of the article's sections.<sup>18</sup>

Although there is nothing inherently objectionable about either of these responses, there is certainly nothing particularly progressive or inspiring about them in racial terms. Even worse, in advocating for an uncontroversial, apolitical sports world, these sport-as-somehow-special critics actually let Limbaugh and his racial opinions off the hook. Martin, it is worth noting, was as frustrated with the demands for Limbaugh's dismissal as he was with Limbaugh's initial comments because the whole controversy, for him, had nothing to do with sports. The ultimate function of positing the world of sport as off-limits to any nonsport issue that might be considered controversial is that sport is rendered an irrelevant, if not essentially conservative social institution—one that turns a blind eye to the social status quo, racial or otherwise. In terms of its social effects, the outcome is little different from Limbaugh's privileged, colorblind complacency. It is the kind of agnostic, apolitical vision that is most easily accepted by those who are privileged and empowered to begin with.

The fourth and most popular criticism of Limbaugh—expressed by slightly more than half of the commentaries in the sample (23 of 44)—appears a good deal more engaged and progressive, and is both revealing and dangerous precisely because of that. Somewhat like the previous set of responses, this group held that Limbaugh shouldn't have brought race explicitly into the sacrosanct world of sports. But these critics did not justify their claim on the grounds that sport was apolitical or somehow off-limits to nonsport controversy but rather on the grounds that there wasn't any racism in sports in the first place. More than this, they argued, sport was a paragon and model for appropriate race relations. Thomas Boswell, writing in the *Washington Post*, was one of these critics. Boswell began his condemnation of Limbaugh by saying that the race of quarterbacks was "a dead horse, a forgotten issue" in the NFL, but it was the higher ideals of the league and sport more generally that he felt Limbaugh had really violated:

Despite its violence, the NFL does possess a purity. Merit is honored. Race, religion, and origin are, largely, ignored. Best of all, like sports in general, every premise is measured against reality, not molded to ideology. On days like this, as Limbaugh leaves us, that sounds mighty pure.<sup>19</sup>

Eagles defensive tackle Corey Simon supplied one of the favorite quotations to this effect:

The athletic arena is the one thing that unites us. It takes away racial and religious affiliation. To bring this guy out of the political arena to the purity of football I think is uncalled for. . . . It kind of sickens you.<sup>20</sup>

It almost goes without saying that this idealization of sport as Mecca of racial purity and justice presents a serious impediment for grasping the persistent problems of race and racism in sport and in sport's relation to racial formations in society at large. But what is more troubling about this belief in the racial sanctity of sport, at least in the context of this case study, is that it is based on a colorblind, individualist set of ideals not so different from some of Limbaugh's own. For these critics, Limbaugh's central offense was not his racism. It was not his political posturing or his lack of football acumen or even his underlying White normative vision and privilege. Limbaugh's real offense was violating sport's colorblind, race-neutral language and discourse, exposing for all the world to see and in fact have to discuss the realities of race in operation in the NFL, especially at the skill position of the quarterback. He violated the colorblind code that says you can't call attention to race openly and explicitly, even when it is right there in front of you.

This colorblindness runs deep in American sports culture. Although a full treatment of the point is well beyond the confines of this analysis, it is instructive to note that such an individualist, meritocratic ethos was even apparent in McNabb's initial comments to the media ("I thought we were through with all of that") and at the core of his subsequent clarifications and discussions.

I'm a football player and that was my dream. My dream was to play pro football in the NFL . . . [and] to become a great human being, a person that people can rely on and trust and a good football player.

He also noted he wanted people to "see him as a quarterback not a black quarterback."<sup>21</sup> McNabb's reaction and attitude, according to *Monday Night Football's* Al Michaels, "spoke volumes about the kind of guy he is" and was obviously a big part of the quarterback's popularity and appeal.<sup>22</sup> The only difference between Limbaugh and the sporting establishment on this front is that Limbaugh believed these ideals were being violated by the media, whereas his critics believed they were being upheld.

I have already suggested the sociological shortcomings of colorblind discourse and rhetoric in previous sections. Here, I want to make a couple of additional points.

First is how this avowed race neutrality stands in contrast to the way in which the NFL and its media partners regularly celebrate African American stars such as McNabb and construct narratives of racial uplift and progress around them. Though often conveyed through cultural codes that have their own dangers and abuses (Wheelock & Hartmann, in press), there is nothing, in my view, necessarily wrong with this practice. In fact, I think even subtle narratives of progress can serve a useful, even progressive role in reminding White audiences of ongoing struggles for racial justice. However, it is clearly not consistent with a strict, literal interpretation of colorblind ideals. This brings me to what I believe is one of the real ironies or perhaps tragedies of the entire Limbaugh-McNabb affair: There should have been nothing for liberals in the sporting establishment who were active supporters of McNabb and other Black quarterbacks to be ashamed about. In a society marked by historical and persistent inequalities, the defense of McNabb could well have been seen as a very good, very progressive thing. Indeed, meaningful racial resistance and change requires some degree of this kind of color consciousness and political commitment. Yet the liberal colorblind ideology made the leaders and opinion makers of the sporting establishment—even by those who may have been championing the position for progressive reasons—embarrassed unable to maintain and defend the courage of their political passion and personal commitment.

Making the absence of a meaningful politics of racial resistance in sport all the more problematic is how colorblind idealism can work in tandem with the views that sport should not deal with issues that are controversial or with issues not bearing directly on the world of sport. Together, as I put it in my study of the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement (Hartmann, 2003, chap. 3), this combination of ideals about sport being both racially progressive and yet somehow above or beyond the complexities of everyday politics and social life allows sports elites and sports fans to have their cake and eat it too—to believe that sports is at once a paragon of racial virtue and simultaneously never be required to take a stand on any potentially progressive issues or incidents. The net result is that the ideologies and discourses of the sports world cause its adherents to misunderstand the problems of race in the United States and, even worse, to accept and endorse the legitimacy of the racial status quo and its associated White dominance. And in all of this, the most disturbing discovery is how much the critics who rejected Limbaugh actually had in common with his ideology and discourse.

## **Discussion and Conclusion: Ideologies, Inequalities, and Institutional Practices**

In a rightfully cautious commentary on the rise of Whiteness studies among sport scholars, C. Richard King (2005) argues that the focus of analytic work should not be on the concept of Whiteness per se but rather on White supremacy as a structural

problem. The proper object of study for Whiteness scholars, in other words, should be “the attitudes, ideologies and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of White or European domination over non-white populations” (p. 401, quoted in Fredrickson, 1981).

I agree with King’s point—that the ultimate focus and payoff in studying Whiteness should not be on the structure and meaning of White culture and identity but rather on how Whiteness, a whole set of ideologies, discourses, and identities, serves to produce and perpetuate existing racial hierarchies and White domination more specifically. It is, in other words, the relationship between White cultural forms and the social structures of White privilege and power that is most important to analyze and dissect, the proper project of critical Whiteness studies (for a recent review and commentary, see Roediger, 2006). However, I have a bit of trouble with King’s further suggestion that White supremacy is “self-conscious” as well as systemic (p. 402). In my view, the whole idea of Whiteness as an analytical category is to focus attention on ideas, ideals, ideologies, and discourses that are not fully understood by their advocates and adherents and that, in their unthinking embrace, serve to mystify, misconstrue, and accept the realities of race in the U.S. Whiteness, in this sense, is less an identity than the absence of identity (see Doane, 1997; Lewis, 2004) and more accurately conceived as an ideology and discourse—or set of ideologies and discourses—that limit and constrain consciousness, that get in the way of a fuller understanding and a more progressive vision of racial justice and change. The essence of critical Whiteness studies is to grasp the power of these taken-for-granted, commonsensical ideologies and discourses, to understand how these ways of thinking and talking serve to perpetuate the unequal and unjust social hierarchies of race in the United States through processes—of both mystification and legitimation—neither grasped nor intended by the actors themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The most basic purpose of focusing on media responses and public reactions to Rush Limbaugh’s racially charged comments has been to illustrate this point—to show how deeply engrained and largely unrealized the discourses and ideologies that perpetuate White cultural power and social privilege are in the American sporting establishment and its attendant media. And my broader ambition has been to demonstrate and explore some of the specific ways in which the American sports world both complies with and advances the cultural formations of Whiteness. Based on both critical theory and the empirical data of this case, I have argued that the unique power and analytical problematic of Whiteness in the context of American athletics derive from two key features: its complicity with sport’s colorblind ideals and discourse and the belief or claim that sport is somehow a sacred or special cultural space. Moreover, I have suggested that taken together these beliefs and ideologies constitute the crucial, consequential paradox of sport’s social power as it pertains to race: It is a cultural arena that can be taken seriously and highly valued even as it is dismissed as trivial and unimportant.

But I have still only scratched the surface of the problem of Whiteness and its relation to the world of American sport. Whiteness is far more fluid and multifaceted than this particular case reveals (cf. Kusz, in press). And, as George Lipsitz (1998) writes in his seminal *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, “whiteness never works in isolation; it functions as part of a broader dynamic grid created through intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality” (p. 72). For reasons that should by now be obvious, sport scholars have focused on the ideological and identity aspects of the categories Lipsitz highlights (for a discussion and examples, see McDonald, 2005). And where I believe there are real contributions left to be made is in the institutional realm—the social structures and organizational arrangements that White ideologies and identities take shape in and help to reproduce. And no institution is more important and pervasive in this respect than the market-based economy of the American sporting scene. I am thinking here of the institutional practices and cultural assumptions about a sporting world driven and sustained by a for-profit, capitalist ethos.

Explicating the connections among Whiteness, White supremacy, and market-obsessed sporting establishment obviously requires far more time and space than is possible in the conclusion of a case-based analysis like this one. But let me illustrate by reminding ourselves of why ESPN hired Rush Limbaugh—whose only meaningful experience in the world of sport was a once-upon-a-time stint as the PR man for the Kansas City Royals—in the first place.<sup>24</sup> The racial and political dynamics may have been complicated, but the bottom line was not. The rationale was entirely economic. ESPN believed that Limbaugh would generate interest and intrigue and thus increase market share of their studio show. Many critics of Limbaugh’s comments about McNabb immediately pointed this out. In the NAACP’s initial statement on the matter, in fact, Kweisi Mfume speculated the whole thing was a publicity ploy. “It is appalling that ESPN has to go to this extent to try to increase viewership.”<sup>25</sup> The *Daily News*’s Raismann predicted that ESPN would not only refuse to fire Limbaugh but would likely give him a raise because of how all of the controversy and attention was almost sure to promote the ratings boost the network was looking for in bringing in Limbaugh.<sup>26</sup> The sports economist Jacob Vigdor (2003) went so far as to suggest that if the NFL was promoting African American quarterbacks such as McNabb, it was not for high-minded, liberal principles but for base economic motives: Teams with starting Black quarterbacks, according to his analysis of television ratings, actually outperformed White quarterbacks in terms of audience viewership and fan interest.

What stands out about these and other references to Limbaugh’s market appeal is how deeply taken for granted or matter of fact all interested parties were about the profit motive. The need to increase market share and make as much money as possible is simply not something that anyone felt could be challenged or changed. This is not to suggest that the profit motive is the only interest organizing the production and promotion of NFL football—if nothing else, the Limbaugh-McNabb incident illustrates that there are limits even to this. But economic gain is clearly pervasive and,

more to the point of this article, deeply bound up with both the demographic and cultural dominance of Whites in sport as in the society more generally.

Whiteness functions in a wide variety of forms and contexts in the United States—in ideologies and discourses, in popular cultural practices, and in institutional arrangements and the cultural logics that animate them. The challenge for the critical race scholar is not so much to find Whiteness but rather to figure out the insidious, nefarious, and not so obvious ways it works to perpetuate the normativity of White world views and maintain the privileged position of Whites, even without many Whites themselves realizing what is going on.

## Notes

1. The data and information on which this description and analysis are based come from a fairly extensive reading of the mainstream media coverage. Many of the basic details and most publicized quotations are archived on ESPN's Web site (ESPN.com, "News Services," retrieved November 2005). Sources for other factual information and quotations are cited as appropriate.

2. *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 30, 2003.

3. Associated Press, October 1, 2003.

4. *Washington Post*, October 2, 2003.

5. *New York Times*, October 3, 2003.

6. Associated Press, October 1, 2003.

7. *Washington Post*, October 2, 2003.

8. *Newsweek*, October 13, 2003, p. 25; *Washington Post*, October 2, 2003.

9. One such example came from a conservative public relations executive who believed Limbaugh should not have bowed to the pressures to resign:

Can a prominent white person in America criticize a prominent black person in America without being told his speech is impermissible? He's got a right to be wrong but he shouldn't lose his job because some hypocritical, pinheaded Congressmen and presidential candidates become the speech police. (*New York Times*, October 3, 2003)

10. That such criticisms still circulate was exemplified most recently and dramatically by a column in the *Philadelphia Sunday Sun* (December 4, 2005), wherein Whyatt Mondesire, head of the Philadelphia chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), called McNabb a "mediocre talent" who was "hiding behind excuses dripping in make-believe racial stereotypes" by refusing to run the ball as often as he did earlier in his career. This commentary prompted an apology from Bruce Gordon, CEO of the NAACP: "The NAACP has many civil rights issues that require our attention. Criticizing Donovan McNabb is not one of them" (*Sports Illustrated*, January 6, 2006, p. 25).

11. My thanks to Kyle Kusz who not only suggested this point but also provided the example and some of the language to illustrate and explain it.

12. *Sports Illustrated*, August 7, 2003.

13. A recent profile on McNabb made for the ESPN series *Beyond the Glory*, for example, showed clips of players, reporters, and commentators dismissing Limbaugh as "a racist" and an "idiot." "To McNabb," the narrator in this reconstruction intoned, "the words were the latest version of a familiar refrain . . . in a lifetime of overcoming barriers." Despite the allusion to McNabb's "lifetime" of struggle, the dominant rhetorical theme of dismissing Limbaugh as a racist is to render racism itself as essentially outdated, a thing of the past.

14. *Daily News* (New York), October 2, 2003.
15. Associated Press, October 1, 2003.
16. *New York Times*, October 3, 2003.
17. *Washington Post*, October 2, 2003.
18. *Charleston Daily Mail*, October 2, 2003.
19. *Washington Post*, October 3, 2003.
20. *Washington Post*, October 3, 2003.
21. *Agence France Presse* (English edition), October 2, 2003. McNabb echoed similar themes in the interviews that were part of his subsequent *Beyond the Glory* profile on ESPN (2005). The complicity of colorblindness and Whiteness were even clearer (if more uncomfortable) in this context, as illustrated in the star quarterback's conception of audience and use of pronouns in the following quote: "I'd like people to understand, you know, I'm just like you. Although we're of a different race, another ethnic background, I like to do some of the same thing you like to do."
22. ESPN's *Beyond the Glory*, McNabb profile, viewed November 2005.
23. For a prescient commentary on how racial and other social ideas can be circulated and reproduced in public discourse without the discussants even realizing it, see Goldberg's (1998) discussion of sports talk radio.
24. *Sports Illustrated*, August 7, 2003. This story also laughably points out that Limbaugh was the place kicker for his high school football team and that he played touch football for the Royals staff in their annual contest against the personnel of Kansas City's professional football team, the Chiefs.
25. Associated Press, October 1, 2003.
26. *Daily News* (New York), October 2, 2003.

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