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IMPROBABLE DREAMS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF ELITE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PLAYERS

A Thesis Presented for the Master of Arts Degree
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
The University of Mississippi

Noah Webb
August 2014

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a qualitative case study of an elite high school football program in the American Southeast. I conducted twelve interviews with former players from Lake Kolofa High School to better understand how young men are socialized into pursuing elite levels of sport. Using the society spectacle framework, this thesis extends current debates about primary sources of encouragement for participation to include the collective spectacle of sport. Here, the sporting spectacle acts as a major contributing factor in how young men come to view their chances of achieving upward social mobility through football. Other primary findings focus on the benefits and detriments of participation. Most notably, attention is given to how football serves as a racial safe space for athletes and how sport participation can provide a respite from the stresses of home life. However, similar to big-time college football, there are numerous challenges within elite levels of high school participation, including the time and physical demands that interfere with the school-sport balance. This thesis also considers how these men may participate in the reproduction of their social class through their pursuit of a professional sporting career.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents,

Chuck and Beth Webb.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for their help and guidance throughout this process. In particular, I sincerely want to thank my advisor, Dr. Jeff Jackson, for his diligence, trust, and respect. I also want to thank the twelve men that allowed me to interview them. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversations.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A recent report produced by the National Federation of State High School Associations (2013) found that high school sport participation is at an all-time high. Participation for both boys and girls has increased from a total of 3.9 million participants in 1971-72 to 7.7 million participants in 2012-13. While girls' sports experienced the most significant increases in participation over this time, boys' sports also increased at a steady pace. The most notable increase in boys' participation was in football. The number of high school football participants has increased 23.7 percent since 1971-72. With over 1 million participants in 2012-13, football is by far the most popular high school sport in America. Although the NFHS report does not provide racial background information on the number of participants, other studies have shown that African American males are well represented in this population of high school football participants, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Eitle and Eitle 2002; Upthegrove, Rosigno, and Charles 1999). Eitle and Eitle's (2002) study shows that the odds of an African American male participating in interscholastic football are 2.54 times greater than their white male counterparts. Moreover, Lapchick et al. (2012a; 2012b) show that African American males account for a high percentage of athletes who play professional and major college football in the United States. For example, 67 percent of the players in the National

Football League (NFL) (Lapchick et al. 2012a) and 43 percent of the players in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division-I football programs (Lapchick et al. 2012b) are African American males.

However, very few American males, especially African American males, will make it all the way to the professional levels of sport. In fact, only about four white males in 100,000 and about two black males in 100,000 will reach the professional ranks (Johnson and Migliaccio 2009). Nevertheless, young black males continue to be pushed in this direction by both kin and non-kin groups (Shakib and Veliz 2013). Recent research investigates sport as a vehicle of social mobility (Mackin and Walther 2012; Spaaij 2009) and suggests that young black males may be complicit in the reproduction of their social position by aspiring to a career in professional sports (Singer and May 2011). Other research (Singer 2008) focuses on the benefits and detriments of Division-I college football participation on African American males, most notably how the time and physical demands of participation impact student-athletes' education.

In addition, much of the recent research in this area relies on large, nationally representative data sets, rarely incorporating qualitative data to support their hypotheses. Very few of these studies use in-depth interviews with previous high school student-athletes to understand how they make sense of the institution of high school sports, and none of these previous studies has collectively assessed all four of these measures – education, encouragement, social mobility, and social reproduction – in a qualitative study. In fact, Mackin and Walther's (2012) study, using nationally representative data, calls for qualitative studies to complement quantitative studies such as theirs. To better understand the social processes at play, we need to give a voice to student-athletes to learn more about how they experience this world.

I chose to conduct such a study, in which I used a qualitative case study approach to broadly investigate how African American high school student-athletes came to make sense of the institution of high school sports through their socialization and participation. Through in-depth interviewing, I sought to better understand how former high school student-athletes, specifically African Americans, perceived their chances at achieving social mobility through both sport and education. Building from Shakib and Veliz (2013), I examined how and where these student-athletes received encouragement for participation. I also assessed the kinds of early career path choices that were made in the pursuit of athletics, and how the encouragement for participation and the collective spectacle of sport related to collegiate and professional sport aspirations. Adding to Singer and May (2011), I investigated the career aspirations and initial outcomes of previous high school athletes to better understand how social class and racial background contribute to the social reproduction of social class.

I believed this could best be accomplished by interviewing previous players of an elite high school football program. Lake Kolofa High School (LKHS),¹ located in the rural community of Harbortown, Arkansas, is a unique institution, as it is well known for its impressive football tradition. Lake Kolofa holds the only high school football National Championship in the state of Arkansas and holds the state record for ten state championships. LKHS won five-straight state championships from 2003 to 2007, which included an eighty-nine game winning streak – the third-longest winning streak in national high school football history. Since that streak, Lake Kolofa has recorded three more state championships, including the 2012 6A state championship. Lake Kolofa, with its collective dominance, has also produced an

¹ Lake Kolofa High School and Harbortown, Arkansas are both pseudonyms

impressive list of college and professional football players – three of whom are currently on NFL rosters, and many others are presently competing at the collegiate level. While Lake Kolofa has produced many college and professional football players, the vast majority of its participants do not go on to achieve such athletic success. Interviews with these previous players, who had experiences ranging from quitting the high school team to playing professionally, provided the qualitative analysis needed to better understand how encouragement, benefits and detriments of participation, aspirations of social mobility, and social reproduction operate at the high school level.

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapters two and three focus on the literature in which my project is situated and the methods used for research. The four succeeding chapters focus on the findings of my research. To coherently tell their stories, I broke up the findings into major sections: the collective spectacle of sport, the path to football, the challenges within sport for its participants, and life after high school football. The concluding chapter discusses how my main findings interact with and expand upon previous research, including the broader sociological implications and limitations of my study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sport, Race, and Media

The media, which serve as a prominent socializing institution, have long exaggerated the likelihood that African Americans can achieve success through sport. This socialization limits the perception of career opportunities for young, black males and ultimately promotes false career paths (Johnson and Migliaccio 2009). As a result, the general sporting experience for American youth becomes more pronounced for black males, who often cite sport participation as a way out of poverty (Edwards 2000). However, Johnson and Migliaccio (2009) note that it is highly unlikely that these young men will ever reach the top of the athletic hierarchy, and they argue that this has a negative impact on the identities of young, African American males.

Outside of sport, African Americans are presented with few positive depictions of black males in the media. Within sport, they are presented with a plethora of black sports icons, who become the only positive role models for these young men to idolize (Johnson and Migliaccio 2009). Achieving success through sport becomes the common message that young, black males receive. The media often present these successful athletes as rags-to-riches stories, where they had to escape the inner city to reach success, even though very few professional athletes come from such oppressive conditions, and this influences many African American males to view these black athletes as heroes or role models (Boyd 2003; Taylor 1999).

Edwards (2000) notes that the problem with the media's damaging approach is not that they are presenting images of athletic success for African Americans, but that they rarely present other avenues that depict successful, black role models. As Edwards notes, this has serious consequences:

The damage is done when countless young African-Americans engage in unconscious racial stereotypic thinking and actions that funnel them into focusing on preparation for a very limited number of opportunities in professional sports – to the exclusion of opportunities in other attainable careers. (110)

The media, in this way, create “a belief by family and community that the pursuit of sport offers African American boys a chance at being successful” (Johnson and Migliaccio 2009:100). As a result, many young African Americans are socialized into viewing sport as a viable career option, making them less likely to view traditional career paths as accessible. Hardin, Dodd, Chance, and Walsdorf (2004) note, “Black male youths are more apt to envision sporting careers to the exclusion of other areas of personal development and more realistic career opportunities” (213). Moreover, “the approximately 3,000 Black Americans who make a living as professional athletes overshadow the more than 60,000 who work as doctors or lawyers” (Hardin et al 2004:213-14 citing Hartmann 2000).

Connor (2009) further highlights the importance of this reality, noting that even if black athletes successfully make it through the professional sport pipeline, they become powerless due to the influx of athletes that are attempting to achieve success at the highest levels. As athletes become interchangeable, their individual importance decreases. In sports like basketball and football, where blacks outnumber whites, this reality all too often impacts young, black males who are aspiring to reach the top of their profession. Through the media's promotion of few attainable career paths, these men are often socialized to fail in their pursuit of a sporting career.

Smedley and Smedley (2011) note that this practice has systemic roots, where, historically, few occupational and educational opportunities have been extended to African Americans due to centuries of slavery, segregation, and marginalization. Most opportunities for success were blocked for the black community, thus they were presented with two avenues for success: entertainment and sports. Smedley and Smedley note, “as a result, young black boys grew up in a narrowly focused world” (326). The opportunities for young, white males, however, have never been as restricted. Smedley and Smedley note, “If every six foot and over black youth had the background education, broad cultural experiences, and choices and options available to young white boys, the situation in sports (and entertainment) might look very different” (327).

The Spectacle of Sport

In tandem with the media, the spectacle of sport also serves as a socializing agent. My conceptualization of “spectacle” is influenced by, and extends the work of, two key social theorists, Guy Debord and Douglas Kellner. For Debord ([1967] 1977), “The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible,” and which ultimately “unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena” (Section 10; Section 12). Kellner (2003) extends Debord’s theoretical perspective to include the role of media and argues, “[M]edia spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution” (2). For these two theorists, the intertwining roles of production, consumption, and entertainment – and the images and commodities they produce – play a major role in society and in the formation and maintenance of spectacles. Here, the experiences of everyday life are “shaped and mediated by the spectacles of media culture and

the consumer society” (2). In this way, human beings become estranged from actively producing their own life and are subject to the forces of the spectacle, which has the power to paralyze and alienate one from using creativity and imagination in his or her life choices. The result of the spectacle is “*total occupation of social life*” (Debord [1967] 1977:Section 42).

As Kellner notes, the spectacle culture has, over time, found its way into many facets of every day life, and, in sports, he believes that the spectacle results in the deification of players and teams, like that of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls throughout the 1990s. However, Kellner’s view of the sports spectacle is limited to that of fandom, and he differentiates between participating in sports and viewing sports:

Whereas the activity of participating in sports involves an active engagement in creative practice, spectator sports involve passive consumption of images of the sports spectacle, which mobilizes spectator energies into deification of players and teams and the celebration of the values of competition and winning. (Kellner 2003:65)

Here, Kellner removes sports participants from the socializing pressures of the spectacle.

Similar to Kellner’s work, other literature about the sports spectacle often limits its analysis to a macro perspective of sports media, including sports fandom and the celebration of achievement, sporting mega-events, globalization, and commercialism (Breckenridge and Goldsmith 2009; Kellner 1996; Kellner 2003; Lee 2005; Marivoet 2006; Silk and Manley 2012). While some of these key tenets certainly play a role in my own research, I believe there is one missing dimension: the sports spectacle as a socializing agent for sport participation among the athletes themselves. At the micro level, this type of analysis sheds light on how the sporting spectacle itself is able to encourage participation through captivation, and it also includes the encouragement for participation from both kin and non-kin sources and an analysis of the path taken versus the path not taken. This level of analysis allows for the explanation of how and why

Lake Kolofa is fundamentally and structurally different than the ordinary high school football program. More broadly, this perspective removes some of the blame from black individuals, families, and their communities for placing a priority on a sporting career over a non-sporting career. Extending the theoretical perspective in this way shows us how the social structure is in concert with the collective spectacle of sport, allowing us to better understand the media, sources of encouragement for participation, its consequences and effects at elite levels of sport, and how it potentially reproduces social inequality for those who have become – and live the life of – the spectacle.

Encouragement for Participation

Shakib and Veliz (2013) use nationally representative data to argue that African Americans receive more encouragement from family and non-kin sources to participate in athletics than do youth of other racial backgrounds. Their article is important for understanding African American sport socialization. Shakib and Veliz highlight the fact that “5% or fewer of high school athletes, regardless of their race/ethnicity, ever make it to an NCAA team” (297). For African Americans, the numbers are even lower, and, beyond college, “only 3000 African Americans make a living as professional athletes and the majority of pro-athletes have careers lasting less than five years” (297).

Despite the unlikelihood of making it beyond high school athletics, African Americans continue to emphasize sport as an avenue for social mobility. Shakib and Veliz discuss how African American sport socialization results in these professional sport aspirations. American culture has created an ideology that connects African American males to sport participation more so than other groups. This ideology has been compounded by the high visibility of African

American sports participants in the media. Shakib and Veliz, and also Feagin (2010), explain how scientific racism has justified perceived physical differences between blacks and whites, creating what is known as the “myth of the natural black athlete.” Shakib and Veliz (2013) note, “Scholars argue that the media perception of African Americans’ achievements in sport as a consequence of natural gifts is internalized by African American families and creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Perceiving themselves as having a physical advantage, African American parents push their children to pursue sporting careers” (298).

These authors determine that it is not only the parents who do the encouraging, as previous research has suggested, but also teachers, coaches, and peers. They found that African Americans receive the most encouragement, and it is equal among families and non-kin groups. Shakib and Veliz state, “These findings are consistent with studies that discuss the formation of racial self-schematas related to athletic identities. Particular self-schematas are more likely to be ingrained if they come from multiple channels of social influence” (311). Thus, Shakib and Veliz found that the myth of the naturally gifted black athlete, and other related racial stereotypes, is internalized by the larger society, not just African American families. With encouragement coming from kin and non-kin groups, this finding is important for understanding sport socialization for African Americans. Shakib and Veliz identify two key areas for future research. First, are youth with college and professional sport aspirations more likely to report encouragement from either kin or non-kin supporters? Second, are African American athletes being pushed toward sport and pushed away from education by kin and non-kin groups? I will examine these two questions in my qualitative case study of Lake Kolofa football players.

Sport and Education

Taking a different approach to African American sport participation, Singer (2008) looks at the connection between sport and higher education. In his review of the literature, Singer found that most of the educational experiences research on African American collegiate athletes has used “secondary analysis of large national data sets on college athletes, and has been conducted prior to the 21st century” (400). Much of this scholarship examines African American males and their integration into big-time college football and basketball programs at predominantly white institutions of higher education. This scholarship looks at racial differences in the educational experiences and outcomes of athletes in such programs, and largely finds that “African American athletes experience academic, social, career transition, and financial challenges that, in many cases, their white counterparts do not experience” (399). Singer reports that some scholars suggest that participation for African Americans provides educational and career opportunities that would otherwise be unattainable. Other scholars, most notably Branch (2011), suggest the exploitative nature of college sport participation, where eligibility for participation becomes more important than academic development.

Singer’s (2008) study, framed under the psychosocial benefits and detriments binary, qualitatively explores the educational experiences of African American male athletes. The men in Singer’s study recognized the benefits that they received as college sport participants, but they felt that the time and physical demands devoted to football were detrimental to their development as a student. Because of this, these sport participants felt that the term “student-athlete” was an “inappropriate label and inaccurate description” (Singer 2008:402). Singer builds on the work of Staurowsky and Sack (2005) to conclude that these participants refused to even refer to themselves as student-athletes. Instead, they preferred “athlete-student” or “scholarship athlete”

(403). They cited the time and physical demands of football as being detrimental to their ability to be as good a student as non-athletes. Singer notes, “These athletes made the assumption that ‘regular college students’ do not have similar time and physical demands placed on them during their college experiences. This subtheme from the study should be explored by sport sociologists in future research” (404). It would be useful, therefore, to see whether student-athletes at the high school level have a similar viewpoint. I want to find out whether high school sport participation, especially elite high school football, has detrimental effects on academic development. In addition to Singer’s call for more research to be done in this area, he also suggests that the recruitment of athletes from unprivileged backgrounds also deserves attention. Studying high school athletes would allow for this to be done. I am curious to investigate how the recruitment of high school athletes influences their academic development, aspirations for social mobility, and educational outcomes.

Adler and Adler’s (1991) analysis of athletic and academic role conflict among black college basketball players was highly informative for my project. Adler and Adler found an emerging conflict from the pressure to be both a great student and a great athlete. The academic role was interrupted by the institutional demands placed upon these athletes. In addition, the men in their study, through a specialized, narrow focus on athletics over academics, became engulfed in their athletic identity. This engulfment, as Adler and Adler note, allowed these men to abandon alternative paths to success in pursuit of an elusive professional career. They became proficient in an athletic role that was destined to end. Adler and Adler note that these men did, however, have a valuable experience, though this prized involvement was not without its consequences. Their university largely exploited their athletic talents as they provided entertainment for others, and through their role specialization, were partly socialized to fail.

Sport, Social Mobility, and Social Reproduction

Mackin and Walther (2012), and Spaaij (2009), examine sport as a vehicle for social mobility. Sport participation's effect on social mobility has been a debatable topic, with many scholars divided on whether participation advances or hinders upward social mobility. Stressing the importance of this area of study, Mackin and Walther note, "Since more than half of all high school students participate in high school sports, assessing the impact of participation in sport on the social mobility of student-athletes is of interest to the student-athletes themselves, parents, teachers, school administrators, and policy-makers" (671).

Mackin and Walther (2012) use two waves of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to test two sociological models: the zero-sum model and the developmental model. The former, in Singer's (2008) terms, would be detrimental, hindering academic performance and mobility, and the latter would be beneficial, enhancing academic and labor market development. Mackin and Walther's (2012) research found limited support for the developmental model for participants of all racial backgrounds. However, they conclude by stating, "sport participation positively affects mobility though less than previously expected" (686). Mackin and Walther find that African American athletes are more likely than white and other African American non-participating students to stay in school longer. Rueben May (2009), in an ethnographic study of high school basketball, also found that sport participation can keep young African American men in school, increasing their chances at earning a diploma and making them more likely to be able to achieve further educational attainment.

Moving forward, Mackin and Walther (2012) believe that future research in this area should investigate the effect of individual sports on educational outcomes and social mobility,

especially revenue generating sports like basketball and football, which are more often played by African Americans of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Upthegrove et al. 1999). Mackin and Walther (2012) also make a call for qualitative studies to accompany the numerous quantitative studies in this area. They state, “quantitative studies such as this should be complemented by qualitative ones which shed light on the social processes through which race, class, and gender affect social mobility both directly and indirectly” (686).

John Singer and Reuben May (2011) take the social mobility discussion a step further, exploring how African American males may reproduce their social class through sport. Sport participation is identified as a possible source for social mobility, and, as noted in other research, many black athletes pursue this option, while excluding other possible paths to success. Singer and May, citing Bracken (2007) and Simons and Butow (1997), show that African Americans are more likely than whites to participate in sports with the expectation that it could lead to a college scholarship or professional sport career – what Singer and May (2011) refer to as “hoop dreams.”

Most studies concerning cultural capital’s influence on educational outcomes focus solely on education, avoiding other agents of socialization, like athletic participation. This is where Singer and May begin their research, investigating the early career path choices that are made by young men with professional sport aspirations. Their research, part of a broader study with more participants, finds that “in general, the young men focus on the pursuit of hoop dreams to the exclusion of other types of aspirations that might place them in a better position for mobility” (306). Singer and May’s article is particularly important because social reproduction in athletics is rarely studied. For future research, they make a call for studies to further examine the career aspirations and outcomes of young men to better understand how social class and race influence the social reproduction process. Singer and May note, like other scholars before them, that “sport

has been regarded by many people to be one of the few places where [African Americans] could find success, be accepted, and achieve the American dream” (301).

Singer and May use social reproduction theory to examine the case of a single black male, Cerico, who might have been “complicit in the reproduction of his social position by aspiring to a career as a professional basketball player” (301). Cerico attended Northeast High School, located in a low-income, crime-ridden, and densely populated area. Singer and May note, “many of the young men of Northeast view athletics as the only viable means of escaping the desolate conditions of their community” (306). Cerico, like his other family members, was considered a naturally gifted athlete. This belief, coupled with his perception of limited choices for upward social mobility, propelled Cerico to embark on a professional sporting career in basketball. However, Cerico’s focus on basketball led to a decline in his academic development, leaving him “unable to develop many of the necessary skills that would enhance the possibility he might experience social mobility” (309). Cerico, now out of high school, never received any offers to play basketball at the college level. Singer and May believe that Cerico’s decisions ultimately “support the reproduction of his social class” (309).

Singer and May argue that high schools and colleges also create this cultural reproduction. Students of color and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disadvantaged in educational settings, while the affluent, and often white, students are able to have their culture and class reproduced. Similarly, I wish to examine how African American high school athletes, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, may be disadvantaged in sport settings. Specifically, I want to investigate how these participants are socialized into pursuing sporting careers by exploring how encouragement from kin and non-kin groups can lead to the social reproduction of social class. This approach removes the blame from

the individual, like in Cerico's case, and focuses on the larger social structure and social processes at play.

Conclusion

Together, these studies present a unique and exciting opportunity for future research. Using Mackin and Walther's (2012) suggestion, I propose to qualitatively study an individual sport, high school football. By examining one sport, and its previous players, I can bring all of the above studies together to collectively assess the encouragement, education, social mobility, and social reproduction of previous players from an elite high school football program. In particular, my study will explore four main questions: (1) How do high school athletes, especially those with collegiate and professional sport aspirations, experience encouragement to play sports from kin and non-kin groups? (2) Does participation in an elite high school football program have detrimental effects on the academic development of participating athletes? (3) How does participation in a revenue generating sport, like football, affect aspirations for social mobility? (4) Does the encouragement for participation in sports from either kin or non-kin groups lead to the social reproduction of social class?

III. METHODS

I conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with previous players of the Lake Kolofa football program to explore the broad ranges of experiences related to education and athletic participation, the encouragement for participation, sport as an avenue for social mobility, and to expand current research on the social reproduction of social class. My research approach was designed as a qualitative case study, which I combined with a brief demographic questionnaire.

I interviewed twelve men, who were all former Lake Kolofa football players and ranged in age from 18 to 38 (see Appendix A). Five of the men had recently finished their high school career and had signed athletic scholarships to play either college football or baseball. Three of the men were current college football players. Two of the remaining four previously played college football, one of whom played professionally, and the final two men did not play beyond high school. I used a set list of questions during the interviews, which had previously been approved by the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B). The questions specifically addressed encouragement for participation, education, college recruitment, aspirations to play beyond high school, and the challenges facing black athletes. The interviewees completed a brief demographic questionnaire at the end of each interview, which asked for their age, racial identity, educational attainment, and current occupation (see Appendix C).

I used Facebook, Twitter, and email to recruit former players for interviews, whom I identified through news articles and through recommendations from the men I interviewed. Facebook became the most successful form of recruitment, and all of the men I interviewed were initially contacted through that medium. On Facebook, I sent each potential participant a message and a friend request. The message was a brief, yet descriptive, overview of my project and included a request to interview these men over a meal or a cup of coffee, or, if necessary, over the phone. The response rate was fairly high, and recruitment became easier once I established mutual friends and rapport. To be eligible for participation, the members of the target population had to be at least eighteen years old, former Lake Kolofa football players, and they had to have played at least one year on the varsity team. I initially sought out players who had recently finished playing high school football, which I thought would allow them to best speak to the most recent success of the team and how that success has impacted education, encouragement, aspirations for social mobility, and the social reproduction of social class.

The ten face-to-face interviews were conducted at restaurants in three different towns. I commuted back-and-forth between these cities multiple times during the data-gathering process. Seven of the interviews were conducted in Harbortown, while the other three were conducted in nearby towns. At the suggestion of my advisor, I offered to buy each participant a meal, and after finishing either lunch or dinner and chatting about my project, I would begin the interviews. The average length of these interviews was just over thirty minutes, with the shortest interview lasting fifteen minutes and the longest interview lasting just under an hour. In all, I spent between one and two hours with each participant. The two phone interviews were conducted with men who no longer live in the area, and they ranged from ten minutes to thirty-three minutes. All twelve of the interviews took place between February and March of 2014.

Upon receiving consent from the participants, I recorded the ten face-to-face interviews with a digital recorder, and I used a phone call recording application for the two phone interviews. All of the interviews were later transcribed and coded for recurring themes. All of the interviewees, their friends, and family members, as well as the schools and locations they mentioned, were given pseudonyms in this document to ensure confidentiality.

This study is limited to one high school in the state of Arkansas. As a qualitative case study, the findings are not intended to generalize all high school athletes or their respective programs, but the data do highlight the experiences that many high school athletes do encounter, especially in highly competitive programs. A case study is defined as “an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon” (Orum, Feagin, and Sjoberg 1991:2). Orum et al. provide four advantages of qualitative case study research. First, “it provides a way of studying human events and actions in their natural surroundings” (7). Second, through its holistic approach, “it can offer a researcher empirical and theoretical gains in understanding larger social complexes of actors, actions, and motives” (8). Third, “the case study can enable a researcher to examine the ebb and flow of social life over time and to display the patterns of everyday life as they change,” allowing the researcher to “uncover the historical dimension of a societal phenomenon or setting” (12). Fourth, this approach “lends itself to theoretical generation and generalization” (13). Orum et al. note that quantitative researchers have criticized case study research for lacking reliability and being “too unreliable to permit the construction of solid, scientific evidence” (18). However, they state, “this remains more an assertion than a proven reality” (18). Concerning validity, Orum et al. believe case study research “provides a clear advantage over other methods of investigation” (19). Thus, the purpose of this study was to give a qualitative voice to the numerous quantitative

studies in this area that rely on large, national data sets. The qualitative data that I gathered builds upon similar research and will open doors to future research concerning America's most popular high school sport.

IV. THE COLLECTIVE SPECTACLE OF SPORT

For many of my research participants, it was the collective spectacle of the entire Lake Kolofa football scene that made them want to participate. While many of these men discussed the encouragement for participation in expected ways, as coming from family, friends, and coaches, the majority of this encouragement came from the collective spectacle of Lake Kolofa football. I argue that this spectacle often trumps the encouragement coming from individual people, that its significance is larger than family or the peer groups themselves. The tangible rewards and opportunities of football participation were highly visible. These men grew up hearing about the school's exceptional achievements on the football field, and all of them watched at a young age as Lake Kolofa dominated their opponents, won numerous state championships and competed at a national level. As Marcus simply stated, "It's just the thing to do in Harbortown on a Friday night."

The Spectacle of Football at Lake Kolofa

In the small, rural community of Harbortown, there are few, if any other, activities that captivate the town in the way that football does. As Marcus noted, the Lake Kolofa football team draws the community closer together, making Nighthawk Stadium the place to be on the night of a game. This experience, bordering on a town ritual for residents of all ages, has a significantly profound impact on the area's youth. Fred told me, "My first time goin' to a Lake Kolofa game I was in middle school. I went to one and after that, it was like, I gotta play. I gotta be a part of this." Or, as Bernard said, "I wanted to be a Lake Kolofa Nighthawk. As a child, the majority of

the kids wanted to be a part of Lake Kolofa football. We just couldn't wait till we got that chance to play Lake Kolofa football.” For Fred and Bernard, the socializing effects of the sporting environment were powerful enough to encourage them and their peers to dream about one day being a member of the football team. Many of the men that I spoke to would recall specific players that really stood out to them at a young age. They idolized these older players, and Friday nights became the topic of conversation during the following week of school: “[W]hen you go to school everyday, you hear kids talkin’ about, ‘Did you see that big play?’ And so, you wanna go there every night to see that big play. And then, it just makes you wanna be part of that.” Like Kellner’s view of the spectator spectacle, many of these men deified and celebrated the older players. However, on the micro level, these individuals were drawn to participate in and contribute to the on-field successes of the football program.

This spectacle, with fans traveling near and far to attend, also becomes the subject of stories that are passed down from old to young. Richie, who was born and partially raised in Chicago, recalled his father, a Harbortown native, telling stories about Lake Kolofa’s football dominance. Richie said, “My dad always talked about Lake Kolofa. I just always wanted to play for ‘em, ‘cause you hear so much about ‘em all the time – I mean, all the championships they win, and so I just always wanted to play for them.” While Richie, then in elementary school, was encouraged to play football by his father in the Chicago area, he was more drawn to the idea of one day playing football for Lake Kolofa. Richie did not just want to play football for *any* team. There was a football program further south that really caught his attention. Here, the encouragement for participation from kin was working in tandem with the Lake Kolofa spectacle. Richie’s dream became true when he left Chicago in middle school to live with his

mother in Harbortown, which allowed him to be further exposed to the Lake Kolofa football program and to rejoin many of his family members who attended Lake Kolofa.

This spectacle even reached out beyond Friday nights in Harbortown, extending to Saturdays and Sundays throughout the country, as some of these men watched in awe as their older family members, friends of their own family, or simply those that they knew about growing up were playing NCAA Division-I football or were in the NFL. Richie, a current standout Division-II football player, told me, “All my family, all my cousins played at Lake Kolofa. I don't know if you've heard of Jonny Fitzgerald, Greg Griffin, Kenneth Griffin², them are all family members. I just always heard about them so much, so I might as well follow them.” The three men that Richie mentioned all played in the NFL, and it became Richie’s goal to follow in their footsteps. Richie was able to see his own kin experience a considerable amount of success, and those rewards seemed attainable to him and worthy of pursuit.

Adam had a similar experience as a child, and when I asked him what got him into football at a young age, he said:

Well, more or less, it kind of originated from growing up in the area, watching my favorite college team on television and realizing that a lot of these guys are coming from my school, you know. A lot of the guys that I knew of and liked to watch were coming from my school, playing on ESPN, and I was like, ‘Man, that's cool.’ That's the big thing that brought me into it. I wanted to come play for Lake Kolofa, make it to big-time college football like those guys, you know.

Here, related to Kellner’s idea of the sports spectacle and influenced by Lake Kolofa’s presence in big-time college football, Adam felt that reaching the same level was not just a dream. He felt, like Richie and others, that there was a legitimate, tangible connection to the world of opportunity. Here, that opportunity was a realistic shot at a football career. Moreover, Adam’s statement, “that’s cool,” is an expression of wonderment and is indicative of the emotional

² Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees, their family members, and other former players

element of the spectacle. Adam, like many others, was absolutely captivated by Lake Kolofa and how well the team competed at an elite level. This wonderment often solidified itself as a strong emotional attachment to the community, the school, and the football program. The stories that these men once heard as children were now visually accessible on Friday nights and on television sets on football weekends. The spectacle of sport touched many areas of their lives.

Bernard was initially attracted to the physical elements of the spectacle – the shiny helmets and the bulky pads:

I got started, you know, just ‘cause bein’ a kid and goin’ to the football games, seein’ the football helmets. As a child, I loved football helmets and I loved football pads to the point where me and my brother would get paper board and put it under our shirts as if we had on pads.

Here, the collective spectacle was so impactful that he and his brother would attempt to recreate it at home in creative ways. And while the football uniforms, at the time, seemed reason enough for Bernard to participate, as he became older it was the emotional element of the spectacle that really drew him in: “[J]ust to see the atmosphere of the fans and the camaraderie of all the football players, it’s just something I always wanted to do.” Together, the physical and emotional elements of the spectacle, strengthened by the team’s success and the community’s support, allowed and encouraged Bernard to imagine himself as a future Lake Kolofa football player.

The active college recruitment of Lake Kolofa’s football players also greatly contributes to the collective sporting spectacle that draws these young men in. It was not uncommon to see some of the most familiar faces in college football – the very men coaching the college teams that Harbortown’s youth watched on Saturdays, including Nick Saban, Steve Spurrier, and Phillip Fulmer – strolling the sidelines during practices or sitting in the stands on a Friday night. Adam noted, “Yeah, we’ve seen scouts and stuff nonstop. You would randomly be at practice and just see a group of guys. LSU would be there. You’ll see guys from Auburn. Alabama would

be there. You see all these different people, and you're just like, 'Wow!'" He continued, "Seein' all that, of course you're thinkin' about college and the pros." Some of these men saw these sightings as distractions from their daily practices and weekly games, but these men also came to see the recruitment visits to Harbortown as firsthand visibility of the "next level." And, again, Adam used a strong expression of wonderment – "wow!" – to indicate how satisfying it was to be at the center of attention of those for whom he and his teammates held much admiration.

Some of these men were not the ones being surveyed by the big-time college scouts, yet they were still influenced by their presence. Quinton, who played for a local junior college football team and is now on the Lake Kolofa coaching staff, told me:

You know, I had guys like Jeremy Rankins, who went on to play professionally, Paul Kingsford, who went on to play professionally, one of my great classmates, Charles Moncrief, who went on to have tryouts [in the NFL] and played at LSU, Brian Freeman, who went on to play at Ole Miss, and as I become older, those young guys came in behind me, so I felt like it was something that I could fit into, something I could do.

For Quinton, being surrounded by young men with exceptional talent in grades both ahead of him and behind him, and experiencing the continual presence of college scouts and the national exposure of his teammates, influenced him deeply. This allowed Quinton to feel like it was a goal he could also accomplish.

Encouragement for Participation

The provocative spectacle of sport and the visibility of opportunity were often coupled with encouragements from family and friends to pursue football, frequently with the hope of obtaining an athletic scholarship or even a subsequent NFL career. The collective spectacle often fueled this encouragement from primary socializing agents, as the aggregated rewards and opportunities from previous teams and players were shown to be attainable. Perhaps because of

this, all of the men I spoke to began playing football at a young age, and, as I will discuss in the next section, this may have also been compounded by racial identity.

Much of this encouragement came from the family, and, for many, playing football was a “family thing,” meaning they were often expected to play. Terrance told me: “All my cousins and all my family members, they played and all that, so that's just what I was born into and everything.” Because of Lake Kolofa’s storied history, and due to Harbortown’s small size, this expectation to play – and be good – was a large part of the encouragement process. As Quinton pointed out:

At Lake Kolofa, it’s more so your name – that last name. Your last name should carry a lot of weight, so, therefore, if you got that last name, you better be ready to play football or should be able to. Because, if not, you know, apparently you’re not off that family tree. You know, and that family tree should carry a lot of weight, you know. Automatically, when you say your last name, boom, okay, I remember your uncle. I remember your brother. I remember your daddy. I remember your cousin. I remember he used to play this; I remember he used to play that. He was good at this and good at that, so you should be able to do that. That’s just how it is.

This notion of an expectation to compete at a high level due to family background further highlights the power of the spectacle. The images of the spectacle are formulated and reformulated from years past, which results in a seemingly inescapable path to predetermined football stardom. If you fail to meet those expectations, as Quinton noted, you must not truly be related to the greats that came before you.

Gender roles play an important role in the encouragement for participation, as well, and this was often related to familial connections to the football program. Many of these men recalled their fathers being more vocal than their mothers about their participation in sports, and many of these men had fathers who once competed for Lake Kolofa. As Richie said:

He just wanted me to try it out, because he actually played on Lake Kolofa the first time they went undefeated. Yeah, my dad was on that team, so he got kind of a history behind him, so he wanted me try it out and see what happens.

Richie, and many others, spoke of his own father's achievements and it was clear how proud he was of this connection to Lake Kolofa's storied history. By having the strong connection to the program, and by being expected to play and compete at a similarly high level, many of these men felt obligated as males to do the same thing as their fathers and other male family members.

Gender roles were not limited just to the family expectations and encouragement, but were often discussed in ways that embody what it means to be masculine. Adam told me:

I was influenced by my older brother and younger brother, 'cause I always wanted to make my mom and dad proud about something I was gonna do. I was gettin' to that age where I got to be a man now, so I was growin' up, and, of course you got girls, and they wanna be the cheerleader, so I wanted to be the football player, so stuff like that, too. My motivation was the family part of it and hoping to be able to play with my brothers.

To grow up and be a "man," Adam felt like he needed to make his family proud, and he felt pressure to fit into traditional gender roles, with himself as the football player and his girlfriend as the sideline supporter. Sport has long influenced and reinforced these traditional gender roles (Eder and Parker 1987; Hardin and Greer 2009), and Lake Kolofa is no exception to this history. What it means to be masculine in Harbortown is often associated with football prowess and heterosexuality.

The encouragement to participate at Lake Kolofa was often coupled with the desires of families, friends, and coaches for further accomplishment at the college and professional levels of football. When I asked David who stressed making it beyond high school football the most, he said, "[C]oaches, family, and friends. They, mostly friends, stressed trying to make it to the next level. Friends said I had potential and could go to the NFL and play. They really just motivated me to be better." When I asked David how

that impacted the decisions he made about his future football career, he said, “Yeah, [playing professionally] became most definitely the dream.” David, unlike many of the other older men I spoke with, did actually make it to the professional ranks of football. In Harbortown, the collective spectacle of sport presented images of achievement that seemed to be easily attainable, often altering the road taken (toward sport) versus the road not taken (toward a non-sporting career). For David, the road taken was the pursuit of a professional football career, which he accomplished, though it was relatively short lived.

Conclusion

After speaking with many of these men, I was struck not by their upbringing, not by their passion for the game of football, and not by their football-related decisions, but by how their stories contradicted many myths and current academic debates about black athletes and their families. Commonly, these men and their families are criticized and blamed for holding irrational views about their chances to achieve success in sports. However, I came to realize that they were responding to their surroundings with highly rational behavior. In Harbortown, football is arguably the most visible and important institution in the community. When presented with these options, and when exposed to such a visibly inspiring spectacle, these men exhibited a rational thought process. The road to success and the path to achievement seemed within reach through a sporting career. They felt a strong, tangible connection to the world of opportunity. For many, it was the non-sporting career that seemed less visible, less rewarding, and less accessible. Simply, the rewards of sports participation were more than visible, and their responses exhibited and revealed a strong sense of reason and logic. The collective spectacle has the power to transform experiences, and in the case of Harbortown, it has the power to release one from the stresses of

home life and to become a safe haven in an otherwise dangerous and emotionally taxing place to live for black youth. The next section, which highlights the racial and financial complexities within this sporting institution, focuses on the path to the spectacle.

V. THE PATH TO THE SPECTACLE: MORE THAN JUST A GAME

The path to the football spectacle at Lake Kolofa was often met with two different, but connected, racial experiences. While football was able to serve as a safe place for young, black men, these individuals were also faced with the numerous challenges of being a black athlete. The accepting, welcoming environment of football drew these men into the spectacle. This particular spectacle, in many ways, operated, or at least appeared, as a race neutral meritocracy, in which hard work ensured praise and acceptance from teammates, coaches, and community members. Moreover, many of these young men reported that participating in football kept them out of trouble and gave their life a sense of purpose. However, the challenges of being a black athlete were difficult to escape, even in their fan-friendly community. In many instances, these men were reminded that being black was not easy.

Football: A Racialized “Safe Space”

Football at Lake Kolofa High School was often said to lack any racial problems. The team, which was almost completely African American, often served as a safe place for black youth to participate in their favorite sport. Jarius, who was currently playing at a nearby junior college, said:

I don't think [race is an issue], ‘cause half of our team – I think 21 out of 22 of our starters are black. Most of the players were black. Football is like a safe place because most of the team is black. And coaches, they love ya. They invite us to

their house. We never had a problem with race. Like, no one ever called us the “n” word. Football is a time where everybody in the town comes together.

For Jarius, football was a “safe place” because a majority of the team was black, which allowed him to feel comfortable with his surroundings. These players also had the support of their majority white coaching staff, and rarely, as far as I know, felt directly discriminated against by their football coaches.

For many of these former players, football was seen as a safe place because, like Jarius mentioned, it was predominantly a black space. Due to this high percentage, some of the men I spoke to said race was not a challenge at all; just the opposite, it made football an appealing extracurricular activity in a majority white school. “I mean, like, me living in this time period, I mean, it’s not really any challenges. ‘Cause, as you see, it’s a lot of black athletes playin’,” said Jarvis, who recently graduated from Lake Kolofa and will be playing Division-I football on a scholarship this fall. He continued, “It’s more black athletes playin’ football than any other sport right now than there probably ever was. So, I mean, it’s not a challenge.” Racial opportunity and solidarity, here, were part of the experience. For the black youth of Harbortown, football was seen as a viable, welcoming option, where success was certainly possible, and discrimination was less visible than in other parts of life.

The community’s support was especially important to the players, and it also influenced their perspective on racial tensions in Harbortown. Here, the spectacle of sport brought the community together, and race was seemingly forgotten, or, at least, racial tension was put aside for black and white fans alike on Friday nights. Nick echoed Jarius’s sentiments: “Football was like a save haven. It doesn't matter who you are, what you are. As long as you play hard, you're good.” In the eyes of the community, if you played hard you would be seen as an equal. Football

was a meritocracy, and these men felt accepted by the community through their affiliation with the football team. Football, simply, was a safe place for them to be themselves.

However, not all sports at Lake Kolofa were safe places for black youth. Demarius, who was a star defensive back for the Nighthawks and was recruited by many top football programs in the Southeast, had always loved baseball. Even though he was considered one of the best football players in the state, his dream was – and currently remained – to play professional baseball. This decision, and his pursuit of this dream, was met with many challenges. Demarius was one of the few football players, or Lake Kolofa athletes in general, that played more than one sport. They were expected to specialize at a young age, but, if talented enough, they could also play baseball or basketball. Lake Kolofa's baseball team, though, was nearly all white – around thirty white players and two black players. I spoke with Demarius shortly after his senior baseball season began and not long after he signed a college baseball scholarship. “I don't have any problems with football, but baseball, wherever I go, I have to prove myself. Let's say I'm better than that person, and I have to prove it, and then if I mess up, that's it for me,” Demarius explained. He went on to say, “I'll be on the bench, which has happened to me in high school, also. And, so, like, no matter what I do, I have to be better than the next guy because – black or white – because they can take your spot at any time.”

Demarius also suggested that the baseball team was a white space, and he noted that he had problems in this space that did not exist on the football team. As talented as he was, he felt like he had to prove himself to the baseball team in ways that were not necessary as a member of the football team. When I asked Demarius what happened when a white player messed up, he said:

He gets more chances. For example, I was playin' the outfield – left field – playin' a night game against Tupelo my sophomore year, uh, a pop-up went over

the lights and I couldn't find it. I came out the next play. Once we got three outs I came out. Couldn't even bat, but my other friends – my other teammates, which were white – they mess up, it's okay. Well, I ain't gonna say it's okay, but they get another chance at it, which, for me, I can't mess up 'cause I had one opportunity and I had to take advantage of that opportunity.

Demarius noticed a difference in the way he was treated as a black athlete in two separate sports. For Demarius, football was more likely to be a safe place for both black *and* white participants, but the baseball environment and the different coaches seemed to give preferential treatment to the white participants. In many ways, football was the more comfortable environment for young, black men like Demarius, and that could likely be attributed to the racial demographics of the teams and their experiences with the coaching staff.

The football team was able to foster a sense of camaraderie and togetherness for all of its members, which, in turn, created a safe racial space for young black men. This environment, as opposed to the majority-white baseball program, was largely a black space in the school and the community. Here, a strong majority of the team and its supporters were African American, thus making it one of the largest black spaces in the community. This football and baseball divide began at a young age, as Teddy pointed out:

Um, first time I really paid attention to [my race] was in peewee league. Like, it was mostly black guys playin'. We had, like, three white guys on the team. In peewee league, they don't have that many whites. Most of 'em go out for baseball, so that's when I first really realized that black people – more blacks have a better chance at playin' football. I think most blacks put their time into playin' football because of their speed and their ability to do stuff.

Teddy's point is interesting because it highlights how white and black youth were socialized into playing different sports at a young age. He also noted that black men might have been better suited for football than men with other racial identities because of their athletic abilities. Thus, through the myth of the naturally gifted black athlete, football was viewed not just as a safe

space for race, but also as a space that seemingly offered young black men the best chance for achieving success.

An Escape From A Tough Life

Football served as a safe place for black youth to feel accepted and comfortable, but football was also a space that shielded them from the struggles of everyday life – struggles that some of their white counterparts did not face to the same extent. Football became an escape and kept many youth out of trouble and in the classroom. For some, it even saved their life. Jarvis reflected:

Football, I mean, it really kind of saved me, because, like I said, I grew up – I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and I was down there, I was in a rough area, and like my mom said, if we hadn't moved down here, there ain't no tellin' what I'd be doin'. So football saved my life for that reason, and, you know, givin' me more opportunities than I ever would possibly have.

For Jarvis, football became an alternative to a life that, in his opinion, offered few opportunities. The opportunities that did exist were not as visible as football. Demarius echoed those same thoughts by saying, “Well, it helped me, like, it opened doors for me, for one. Like, I'm not just one person that's in the street.” Demarius went on to say, “Like, right now, I could be at football practice, playin' with my friends, havin' a good time, tryin' to get that one goal, or I could be in the streets, doin' whatever, you know. It really got me out of trouble.”

The time and physical demands of football participation (which I discuss further in the next section) can be detrimental to academic growth. However, in the eyes of these young men, those demands were not completely negative aspects of the football experience. “I think it changed my life. I mean, if I didn't play football, there ain't no tellin' where I'd be right now. ‘Cause all the stuff I could be doin', I ain't doin' ‘cause football occupied all my time,” said

Raymond. “Say durin’ the season, from 3-6, I’m there. After I leave there I ain’t gonna wanna do anything else ‘cause I’m tired, so I go home.” While participation at an elite level can leave little time for family or schoolwork, for Raymond, and many others, it kept him out of trouble. For many of these men, they could not imagine what else they would be doing with their time if they did not play football. They felt concerned about the life they would have lived as a teenager if football were not in the picture. Football became the most visible opportunity for them, and it occupied a large amount of their time. For some, that was one of the most positive aspects of participation.

For others, football participation was discussed not just as an activity that kept them out of trouble; football became the constant reminder that life was highly valuable to them. Teddy best captured this feeling by saying:

Football, at Lake Kolofa and in Harbortown, it saved a lot of guys from doin’ stuff they shouldn’t do or that would mess them up, lock them up, and throw them away. Like, most of the guys – I had some good guys that played junior high with me, but the coaches kicked them off, and most of ‘em are probably in jail and a couple of ‘em are probably dead. Football can save lives in Harbortown, Arkansas, for real. It’s a tough place to live.

For men like Teddy, Raymond, Demarius, and Jarvis, football played a much larger, positive role in their life than I initially anticipated. Football was more than just a game to them.

Football also became a way to escape from the stresses of one’s home life, which, in this small town, could be detrimental not just to academic growth, but personal and emotional development, as well. Players believed that the Lake Kolofa coaches did an outstanding job with this aspect of their lives. Quinton, the peewee coach and high school assistant coach, felt like his most important role was as a mentor. Harbortown was recently devastated by a murder-suicide, and Quinton and the other coaches played a major role in helping the child of the deceased parents find an emotional escape. Quinton, putting football in perspective, told me:

This kid has a lot on his plate. Football is a relief to him. You know, on Friday nights, he was comfortable because he was doin' something that took his mind away from that place, you know, and that was the fact that daddy killed momma, momma's dead, and he ain't got nobody. We just wanted him to know that he's got somebody. It's not just about Friday night with us. That's not the most important thing about it. We try to make it mean much more than just a Friday night. You can't just be involved with just football with these kids.

For Quinton and the young man dealing with tragedy, football became a release from the negative, turbulent aspects of home life and a community that helped him in a time of personal crisis.

Quinton went on to tell me about a young sixth grade student who was struggling in the classroom. While his story does not directly relate to Lake Kolofa High School, it does shed light on the cultural, economical, and racial differences in Harbortown that separate these young black men from their educational instructors, and how football, and not always academics, can further become a beneficial escape from the stresses of home life. Quinton said:

You know, I had a child. He's a sixth grade student. The teacher called me, she said, "Coach Q, I need your help." She said, "I can't get the mom, can't get the dad." She said for three weeks he was just belligerent, throwin' stuff, actin' up in class. I said, "Okay, let's see what's wrong with him." So, we talk to him. Come to find out, it's problems in his home with his momma and daddy. Well, the teacher was surprised. I told her, I said, "I don't even see his momma on Saturdays. I don't see his daddy on Saturday mornin'." I said, "I'm his daddy. I'm his momma on Saturday mornin'." I said, "Who did you just call? Who'd you get?" I said, "I'll be able to help you." She said, "Well, I didn't know that." She said, "Where I'm from, my momma and daddy support me." I said, "I'm sorry. In reality, not everybody lives in that cute, little box." I said, "This kid stays outside of the box. He probably doesn't have anybody that's tellin' him to study, askin' him if he's prepared for school tomorrow, askin' if he's done his homework. He might not have that." You know, then a light came on in her head like she couldn't believe it. I see this everyday. You know, on Saturdays we play the little peewee game, you know, and our biggest thing is, okay, we might have 100 kids and we might see 20-30 parents. I'm sorry, you know, that's just the way it is. You know, some people think they should be there. Well, this kid wants to play football, and this is the only way to escape what's goin' on, so we gonna let him play. He might not can afford it, so we might have a fundraiser and say, "Hey, let's keep this kid in here and keep him out of trouble."

As Quinton pointed out, some of Harbortown's youth grow up without much parental support. Quinton's role as a coach extended beyond his traditional duties; he became the mothers and fathers of these young men. In this role, Quinton spoke to their teachers, sought out help for them, and mentored them along the way.

In this way, football became a surrogate family for these men. Here, their coaches looked out for their best interests at a young age, and their teammates provided a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood that transcended race. As Raymond pointed out, "The football team, you know, we feel like we a family. Most of them guys I played with from peewee and up, so I mean, like, we together." This group cohesion allowed these men to escape from the stresses of home life, and it also helped them academically when their teachers failed to understand their difficult home situations.

The path to football – and the realities of playing on the team – offered something to young, black men that many extracurricular activities could not. Football participation was not just an opportunity to win a state championship, earn a college scholarship, or play in the NFL. It was an opportunity to be one's self without fear of racial discrimination from peers or mentors. It was an activity that kept these men out of troubling situations and allowed them to momentarily forget about their tough lives at home. Football offered these men an opportunity and an environment that was not easy to find in Harbortown.

The Challenges of Being a Black Athlete

These men, as I have pointed out, were drawn to football for many reasons, and they enjoyed how football seemingly offered few, if any, racial problems. But some of them did encounter problems, which reminded them that race was certainly still an issue in the twenty-first

century. Some men were quick to tell me that race was never an issue for them in the community, the school, or on the football team, and would state that those problems do not exist in Harbortown. Other men had different opinions and had experiences that were not as fortunate. These men had to overcome common black stereotypes and myths, and had to balance their black masculinity, which was prominently displayed and openly accepted on the football field, with the accepted masculinity of the school setting.

While football could be an escape from the stresses of home life, balancing home life and football was not an easy task, and it could make being a black athlete a difficult experience.

Teddy, who had just signed a letter of intent to play at a nearby junior college, told me:

[M]ost of the black guys, they probably stay in a certain environment or a certain 'hood, as others would say, and they have to deal with their outside life and then come and play football, but it makes some of the guys play harder, and some of 'em they probably can't maintain the two.

As Teddy pointed out, balancing a tough situation at home with continuous success on the football field can be difficult. Teddy explained that the black players were more likely to live in a certain part of town and have different life experiences than the white players. When I asked Teddy if it was more difficult to be a black athlete than a white athlete, he said:

Yeah, for example, some of the black guys might have gotten kicked out of their house the night before the game or somethin' like that, or they might be stressin' about some family problem financially or they probably – it's just a lot; it's a lot to it.

Football became a much-needed escape, but some of these players were not able to fully escape from their tough life situations.

Beyond Harbortown, Fred encountered racist stereotypes about black athletes from Lake Kolofa when he left town to play college football. Fred told me:

Just, like, the stereotype that all we know is football, being uneducated, getting by just because of football. Sometimes it's hard to shed that. People be like,

especially if you come from Lake Kolofa, people be like, “Oh, y’all didn’t do no work anyway. The teacher did your work. Y’all just got by because of football.” And that’s not the case. It’s kind of like some racism, too. They say we can’t read or write, sayin’ that’s why we can’t ever make it out of college. Stuff like that. They say if we go to a four-year school, we’re going to get in trouble, flunk out, or get kicked out – just because you’re a black athlete. I noticed it after I left Lake Kolofa. Once people find out where you’re from, all of it is going to come flying back into your face.

For Fred, being a black athlete came with discouraging consequences. His peers in college held strong views about black athletes – and black people, in general – which were overtly racist. As Fred pointed out, many of these stereotypes were attached to Lake Kolofa’s football players, who were predominantly black.

Richie saw the challenge of being a black athlete as needing to constantly prove one’s worth to other people, both in school and in sport. In a long conversation about race, Richie said, “Well, to me, it’s just the fact that you always have something to prove. ‘Cause, like, you gotta do more than the average white athlete. It always seemed like, growin’ up, even in high school, it always seemed like we would never get the same treatment or get the same opportunities.”

Richie, a tight end with incredible talent, had mixed feelings about his time at Lake Kolofa. After his junior season, he felt like he should have been named to the All-American team, but a white player – his back up – was named as the All-American, while Richie had to settle for All-State honorable mention. “I feel like he was given all of those things because he was white. Don’t get me wrong; I ain’t sayin’ he wasn’t good. He was good, but it’s the fact that I did everything ... I was overlooked big time,” he said. Richie was discouraged to find out that his reserve was receiving more praise than he was. As a black athlete, he could not help but think it was due to his race. Richie felt like that was a consequence of participation: “That’s the kind of stuff that I feel like black athletes have to deal with. They always have to have something to prove.”

Richie also experienced problems as a student at Lake Kolofa High School. He had teachers who assumed he was a troublemaker because he was black and because of the way he liked to dress. He recalled meeting white girls in classes who would tell him that they did not like him simply because he was black. Richie told me:

[S]ome people, it's not even their fault; it's their parents' fault. That's what their parents teach them. So, there's nothin' you can do about that. It's a lot of hard things we have to deal with as a black athlete and a black student, because people are so judgmental. Like, they don't even know you, but they are so quick to judge you. This whole race thing, I don't even know why it's still even an issue in today's society. And there's still a lot of racism. It's crazy.

As a student, Richie felt discriminated against by his teachers and classmates. As an athlete, he felt like he had much to prove to his coaches and college scouts because he was black. While football had the power to release some men from the challenges of being an African American, Richie could not escape those difficulties as easily. He had to carry that weight around with him everywhere he went.

Demarius also encountered racial issues as a black student-athlete. Demarius discussed how tough it was to balance his identity as a black male with what the school and the baseball team informally imposed as the proper display of masculinity. Demarius said:

You gotta maintain to talk to my people and then I gotta go to the white side of people, you know, like that, for baseball, so I gotta change my mentality, the way I talk, walk. Just be able to adapt into the environment. But that's the hardest part for me, in general.

For Demarius, the most difficult part was being himself when he was not on the football field. He was cognizant of which kinds of behavior were accepted and which were dismissed as inappropriate. He felt the most pressure when he was in white spaces, like the classroom and the baseball field. Demarius recalled, "Nah, the only time you be who you really are is on that football field and at home, around your friends, and stuff like that, but once you come out there's

a certain way you need to act to get anywhere in life, basically.” Demarius felt that he could only be himself around his football peers, his friends, and his family. This posed a serious challenge to him, and it became difficult to maintain these different identities. Football was a safe place, but the broader challenges of being African American were just around the locker-room corner.

Conclusion

The path to the spectacle was not the same for each individual. Some of these men encountered racial discrimination along the way, and some men found an escape from it all through the camaraderie of Lake Kolofa football. Quinton said, “Color doesn’t matter. Money doesn’t matter. None of that stuff matters.” For him, that may have been true as a coach, but for others, the realities of being a black student-athlete *did* matter. The young men that I spoke to exhibited a rational thought process about their participation in football. The benefits of participating were not just limited to a future professional career. These benefits included escaping the widespread discrimination that they encountered in numerous white spaces in their community. Through football, they found a release from the myriad challenges facing African Americans today. Perhaps the material benefits were secondary in their minds, while the immediate emotional benefits, which were felt daily, were more visible. These benefits allowed these men to see football as more than just a game. The football team was also a safe haven.

VI: CHALLENGES WITHIN

The opportunity to play football held many benefits for participating students, but this participation often presented academic and personal challenges. Participation at such an elite level resulted in numerous time and physical demands, which often stood in the way of academic development and personal freedom. The school-sport balance was often disrupted by the importance placed on athletic eligibility over academic growth. The athletic eligibility of each team member was such a vital component to the team's overall success that players who failed to meet the requirements of eligibility often received corporal punishment. This punishment – in the form of paddling for poor grades and misbehavior – aroused immense fear and shame among the former players I interviewed. Contrastingly, the public celebration of these men from the community resulted in newfound stardom. This fame, which helped foster an athletic identity, was often met with delight and wonderment, but it also became difficult for these young athletes to cope with the consequences of achieving such success.

The Time and Physical Demands of Participation

The time and physical demands of Lake Kolofa football created significant challenges for participating students. These demands set them apart from non-participating students by extending their school days into the late afternoon and occupying much of their time. The exhausting nature of such a physically demanding sport also hindered their academic development, as they were often too overwhelmed to balance their academic role with their

athletic role. The long days of practicing, working out, and studying opponents often meant that these men were too tired to then focus their attention on their schoolwork. As Marcus confessed, “Especially when you’re tired, doin’ homework is the least of your concerns.”

During the season, Lake Kolofa’s football players often spent four or five hours a day doing football related activities. Due to the significant amount of time spent on football, these activities began during the school day, which allowed the coaches to have access to and control over their players without keeping them too late into the day. Football players used sixth and seventh period – the final two periods of the school day – to prepare for practice, lift weights, and watch film, while non-participating students remained in traditional classes. When I asked Jarvis how much time he spent on football during the week, he said:

So, like, six hours a day. Six times three is eighteen, and plus, you know, we do Thursdays too, but we’re usually out there for an hour, but we still have to go to the field house sixth and seventh period. Then, you know, Friday is game. It’s kind of like a job, ‘cause you have to do that with school, too.

Participating in football at this level was a big commitment for these men. Like Jarvis noted, it even felt like a job. They had to sacrifice a lot of time for football throughout the week, which left little time for other activities, including family time. Demarius told me:

You barely see your family. Because, like, you wake up in the mornin’, you say, “Alright, mom. See you later.” You don’t see her till about 7 o’clock at night. So, you know, you got your little sister and all them at home. I mean, you’re sacrificing your personal time onto your team and your coaches just to get that one goal, ‘cause after them 15 games, that’s it, you know? So, why not put all in of what you got into that one little goal?

Demarius had to sacrifice a significant amount of his personal time to participate in football, which meant that he was unable to spend much time with his mother and sister at home. However, Demarius felt that this particular sacrifice was worth it, because there was nothing left to play for once the season came to a close.

For these men, being a football player *and* a student resulted in many expectations that were often hard to achieve, and being simultaneously good at both proved to be extremely difficult. “You couldn’t be just a regular person, a regular student,” Jarius told me. “People looked at you different. They expected so much out of ya.”

The expectation to excel in both football and academics presented a problem for the student-athletes who hoped to earn a college football scholarship. Teddy, who had just signed a junior college scholarship with one of the top junior colleges in the area, told me:

I mean, as an individual player, you try to focus on your future, so some guys would try to play hard to get a good Division-I scholarship or something like that, some guys would try to focus on their school work and try to graduate instead of getting a big scholarship, and then some guys would probably try to do both, and it works if you try to do both, but some guys can't really multitask like that, so they probably get less of a scholarship by trying to focus on their schoolwork and passin' the state tests.

Teddy felt that an individual player could either be a good football player *or* a good student, but that it was a significant challenge to excel at both. As a consequence, if one tried to do well in football, his grades would suffer, and if one tried to do well in school, he would not earn a significant football scholarship.

To excel as an athlete required a different level of commitment and focus. In a nationally recognized football program, this often required inordinate amounts of preparation. Being elite competitors meant that these men had to put in extra amounts of work to excel on the football field. Marcus, who led Lake Kolofa to a state championship as the starting quarterback his junior year, spent many hours outside of practice focusing on football, sometimes early in the morning before school or late at night. Marcus said:

I mean, most of the time you get up and just study film. I mean, I studied film when I got home. I didn't study it much towards the end of the week, but on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, I would study it sometimes until ten or

eleven o'clock [at night]. Tryin' to get reads on the defense and all. Tryin' to know what they're gonna do before they do it.

Marcus's preparation may seem out of place at the high school level, but his preparedness was vital to his individual success and athletic trajectory. At the team level, this amount of focus and attention to detail was crucial to the team's collective goal of winning the state championship.

The amount of time and preparation allotted for football set Lake Kolofa's football players apart from both their high school peers and their future college teammates. Marcus pointed out, "Well, most schools in the state only have seventh period football, but we have sixth and seventh [period]." This extra period of time devoted to football allowed Lake Kolofa to practice longer – and perhaps smarter – than their opponents. The benefits stemming from this level of commitment also extended into college. "Playin' at Lake Kolofa, it prepares you for college football," Fred believed. "Because all of the conditioning that we do, like, I feel like we work out harder than any other team in Arkansas." Jarius, Fred's former high school and current college teammate, echoed those same sentiments. Jarius noted, "Lake Kolofa workouts are college-level workouts. Lake Kolofa prepared us for [the junior college] level or D-I level. We already have a taste of it, so we come into the situation ready."

These men began their college football careers with a wealth of football knowledge and fundamental expertise. This skillset was a form of athletic cultural capital that afforded these men power and status in sport, and it gave them an edge as they progressed into higher levels of football. To excel equally as well in academics, however, would have required a similar amount of focus and preparation, but it would have also required and resulted in a different form of cultural capital. These men were instructed to specialize in football at an early age, and, as members of the high school team, most of them became well known in college football recruitment circles. The amount of time spent on football, the exposure to college coaches, and

the name recognition of “Lake Kolofa” ultimately afforded these men a significant amount of athletic cultural capital. Similarly, an exceptional student from an academically-rigorous high school may specialize in an academic field at a young age, belong to prestigious academic organizations, score highly on standardized examinations, be highly recruited by top academic programs and universities, and receive numerous scholarships and fellowships, which would afford a similar level of educational cultural capital. This academic path, however, was seen as less accessible to the men I spoke to. The athletic cultural capital that these young men acquired at an early age often allowed them to see athletic success as a more viable option. They felt as if they could not be both a great athlete and a great student. The difficult task for these men was to find the perfect balance between athletics and academics, but the demands of participation often stood in the way.

Maintaining the School-Sports Balance

Even though it became a challenge to balance the different roles associated with school and sports, football participation did help some of these men remain focused on school and do well, perhaps more so than their non-participating peers, because they were allowed access to tutors and were required to stay eligible. When I asked Marcus how football has helped him, he told me:

I mean, it's helped my grades because the coaches want to keep you eligible, and if you're strugglin' in anything, they're gonna get you help. It's just like a college, they're gonna get you help. I mean, 'cause, I was having trouble in math, and they set up tutors, like during sixth period when we're supposed to be down there at football, they set up tutors for you so you can go to tutorin', get help, and come back down there for football. Without football, I probably would've just had a “C” or failed it, or what not.

As Marcus pointed out, the coaches were mostly interested in eligibility, but as a consequence it often helped these athletes to exceed the minimum eligibility requirements and to have an above average grade. Marcus was successfully able to balance his two roles, and he finished high school with a 4.0 grade point average.

Adam, who quit the football team shortly after his senior season began, noticed that his grades began to suffer without a focus on eligibility and a future college football career. Without football, academics no longer seemed nearly as important as they once were. Adam said:

All the way up until [I quit], I gotta say, my grades were top notch. I was “As” and “Bs” right up until I got out. Then, when I quit football, it seemed like I wasn’t focused on my grades. I remember I actually ended up failing one class. It was an English class. I just wasn’t focused. I didn’t have that motivation. Like, “Okay, if I make my grades, I’m gonna go play college ball.” You know, I didn’t have that focus to make my grades so I could play on Friday nights. Football actually helped my grades. A lot of my buddies were like that, too. Instead of goin’ out with girls, or even if we did meet up with some girls, we’d get together and talk about homework. I feel like football helped. The more sports and activities I had, I was more focused on my grades and everything. It gave me a sense of want, to learn, to do it and figure this out, ‘cause if I made good on these grades, I’d be good to go for football. Whereas when I quit, I was just doin’ everything at the last minute or I wouldn’t do it at all. It didn’t matter. I didn’t have that drive that I had before. I will say that I believe sports play a big role in your education.

For Adam, football kept him focused on school inside and outside of the classroom. The requirements for participation, set forth by the school and the coaching staff, allowed Adam to stay on track, but without such guidance he no longer approached school the same way.

Moreover, some teachers understood that the time and physical demands of football participation were difficult for some athletes to balance with academics, and they were sympathetic to the football players during the football season. This understanding was important for the football players throughout the grueling season, which can last nearly the whole fall semester. Raymond, who was preparing to enter college this fall on an athletic scholarship, said:

Really it was hard to, you know, do work and then practice, but then, the teachers, they worked with us. You, let me say, like, I miss a day 'cause I had to go to the doctor for my leg 'cause I got hurt, they'll make sure that when we get back they have all our work ready for us that we missed. Everything, I mean, work – it wasn't just – like during the season they ain't try to put too much stress on ya, like research paper here, term paper there. They wait till, you know, after football season to do all that stuff.

Raymond was fortunate to have teachers who understood how his commitment to football impacted his academic abilities, and these teachers would sometimes allow him and his teammates extra time to complete assignments during the football season.

However, not each student-athlete was as fortunate. The demands and distractions of participation still stood in the way even though some of these men had sympathetic teachers. For example, the men I spoke to who were key players often had more in-school distractions, such as visits from their own coaches or college recruiters. These visits often took these men away from their classrooms for extended periods of time, which forced them to focus more heavily on athletics while they missed valuable in-class instruction. Marcus explained this deterrence by saying:

I mean, when you get called out every once in a while to go talk to a coach and you miss somethin', it's kind of deterring, but you can't make that up. You don't know what your teacher's talkin' about, but it's just one of them things you gotta live with as a student-athlete.

Marcus struggled to balance his role as both an exceptional student and a star athlete. He worked diligently in the classroom, but he would then have to quickly shift his focus back to football as coaches called him out of class. Marcus felt that this was a hindering component of participation that student-athletes had to deal with.

These men did not need a reminder from their coaches, though, as football was already on their minds. The men that I spoke to recalled thinking about football – an upcoming practice,

their weekly opponents, or earning a starting position – while they were in the classroom. When I asked Demarius if he ever had to focus more on sports than school, he said:

Sometimes, like, especially like my sophomore year. I put it like that because I didn't have a starting spot. I went out there and I'm tryin' to work hard, so in class I'm all focused [on football], and so, then I see my grades droppin' a little bit. I had to learn how to maintain both of 'em. That was the hardest part of it.

Demarius actually became one of only two sophomores to start a game that season. His intense focus on becoming a better, more productive football player continued long after practices and games, which distracted him from his role as a student. For Demarius, finding the proper balance was the hardest part of being a student-athlete.

The more highly recruited players also had to deal with an added distraction to academics, which often occurred shortly after the football season ended. The college recruitment of these men contributed to the increasing time demands that made focusing on school more difficult. College coaches and recruiters stayed in constant contact with these men and often made trips to the area to visit them. "All I gotta say is every night you gon' catch a phone call startin' at 7:00 through 9:30. That's every night," Demarius said. On top of balancing his schoolwork with his athletic duties, Demarius was also forced to focus on and plan for his future on a nightly basis.

For the men who were recruited by many schools, it was a highly distracting experience that often interfered with the regular school day. Fred explained:

Recruitment is crazy. Like, that's the worst time. Coaches are callin' you 24/7. Text messages. They come to the school constantly during school hours. You get pulled out of class every morning. That's no problem with me (laughs); I enjoy gettin' pulled out of class. But it's constant, every day ... [Y]ou hear your name get called on the intercom, "We need Fred Johnson to come to the office." It's like, god, I know I haven't did anything, so it's gotta be a coach. And then the constant visits, leavin', havin' to stay over night on trips. It's crazy. Sometimes they ask if you can leave right now.

Fred's experience highlights the challenges facing high school student-athletes during recruitment. Not only was it difficult to balance his two roles, but his experience was compounded by the added stresses of being pulled out of class, visiting college campuses, and trying to manage his own recruitment. Moreover, not all teachers were as sympathetic to these off-season demands, as Jarius pointed out: "Some teachers didn't care that you were so busy. A lot of teachers didn't understand."

The school-sport balance became more challenging as these men progressed in school. Each new school year presented tougher courses and larger workloads, which added a significant amount of time to their days, especially if they were taking advanced courses. When I asked Jarvis if the school-sport balance became more difficult as he got older, he said:

Like, startin' off every year, you have to get used to it, 'cause I mean, like, every grade you go to it gets harder. The work gets harder, and you have practice on top of that. Then you come home, I mean, like, it's sometimes I got home 7, 8 o'clock at night. I mean, I didn't really have nothin' to do but probably study and 10 o'clock, 10:30 I'm in the bed. Then I have to wake up and do the same thing the next day.

Jarvis's schedule left little time for him to do anything except school and football. These student-athlete time demands became more pronounced as he advanced through school, and he felt as if he simply had to "get used to it."

As these men became juniors and seniors, they also began to take on more important roles for the football team. As the veteran leaders of the team, these men felt as though they had to make academic sacrifices for the betterment of the team. Bernard explained this sacrifice by saying:

Well, as a senior, you have to make the decisions for the younger guys. As a senior, you couldn't really miss practice. When we was in like tenth grade, it was okay for us to miss practice if we had a tutor session goin' on, but, at the same time, as a senior, you couldn't have that. Some guys had it harder while tryin' to balance football and school work because some of 'em had the AP courses. So,

the seniors practice from like 12:30 or 1 o'clock to sometimes like 6:30 or seven o'clock, you know. We were at football practice. So, it was hard. So, sometimes if you had a hard test comin' up, it was either go to practice or go to the library, but you know, I guess with them bein' seniors, knowin' that they're our leaders now, they chose practice and then just had to put in more time of studyin' afterwards. That's really tough.

As Bernard noted, the older members of the team were expected to take on leadership roles, and sometimes this meant having to choose football over a scheduled tutoring session. For these men, the expectation to become team leaders became part of their athletic role, and it directly interfered with their role as students.

The Importance of Athletic Eligibility Over Academic Growth

Balancing athletics and academics became a difficult task for these men, and some ended up paying more attention to their athletic identities than their scholarly ones. This common focus on sports over school is related to the time and physical demands associated with participation, which often made it difficult to adequately balance the two. These demands were also coupled with the recommendations of their coaches, who often stressed education as the means for eligibility, instead of education as the means for academic growth and knowledge for knowledge's sake. Due to their status as student-athletes, their role as team leaders, and their goals to become college football players, education became the means to an end, rather than an end in itself. For the student-athletes, their academic eligibility was vital to the team's success on Friday nights and was also paramount for college football recruitment and successful college placement. The coaches often stressed education for these reasons alone. Marcus, speaking about eligibility, told me, "Well, I mean, of course they wanted to keep you eligible, but, I mean, besides maintaining that 'C' average to be eligible to play, they didn't really care."

Certain players experienced academic encouragement from their coaches differently. For most, eligibility for Friday nights was most important, but for others, like the star athletes, there was a bigger goal in mind. “Yeah, they stressed it a lot. Every day,” Fred told me. “My coach, he was like, ‘If you don't get this, you're not going to be recruited like you want to be recruited.’ They stressed education. They want us to keep our grades so that colleges will keep lookin’ at us.” Members of the football team believed they were better suited in recruiting if they held decent grades, which allowed them to see education as the means to achieving football stardom beyond high school. For example, when I asked David if his coaches stressed education, he recalled, “They didn't want me to end up at just a junior college like a lot of players here do, so they really pushed it on me ‘cause they saw the potential. They wanted me to make the grades so that I could go off to a Division-I program.” David, who did play Division-I college football and had a brief professional career, was encouraged by his coaches to take education seriously enough so that he could choose which college football program to play for, which many of his high school teammates were unable to do and subsequently ended up at junior colleges.

While most of the coaches stressed education for eligibility and college recruitment, the parents of players often stressed education for education’s sake. Even though many parents asked their children to put school first, football was still often in the back of their children’s minds. David, speaking about his family, told me, “Education was what my parents mainly told me to put first, and that’s what I strived for, ‘cause I knew without the grades, I couldn’t play football, and I didn’t want the attachment of ‘Oh, he’s just an athlete.’” David understood that maintaining a good grade point average would help his chances during recruitment, but he also did not want to disappoint his parents, nor did he want to be known as “just an athlete.” His identity as a student was just as important as his athletic identity.

Maintaining the school-sport balance became even more difficult with these multiple channels of influence. The coaches and families of these men stressed different ways to approach their academic roles. Some men were unable to achieve that balance, and they later regretted favoring their athletic role over their scholarly duties. When I asked Fred if, given the opportunity, he would have changed anything about his high school football experience, he said:

If I could do it all over again, I would do some stuff different. I would've focused a lot more on my grades in high school than I do now. Like, in high school, I was just like, "Whatever. I'll do it when I do it." I just let a lot of stuff get behind 'cause I was so focused on football. I would do that all over again... At the time, that's a benefit of being a football player, but now it's a downside because I regret some of that.

For Fred, the benefits of being a football player included being able to miss class for football-related activities and meetings. He felt as though he received preferential treatment at times because he was a successful football player, and he initially recognized that treatment as beneficial. However, he came to regret that approach to academics because he felt unprepared for college. "It's totally different in college," Fred observed. "It was kind of hard to adjust to that, but I got the swing of things my freshman year."

Maintaining Eligibility: The Role of Corporal Punishment in Football

Every few weeks, when new progress reports and report cards were issued, the coaches would check the football players' grades to survey their eligibility. For eligibility, Lake Kolofa's football players had to maintain a "C" average. If they did not meet the minimum requirement, they would be suspended from participation until the next progress report or report card was issued. If a player was deemed ineligible, it often meant he would miss three or four weeks of the season, which, depending on the player's skill and level of importance, could be detrimental to the team's success. In an effort to reduce the number of ineligible players, and in addition to

athletic suspension, the coaches introduced a scare tactic: They would also punish players who still remained eligible to play, but had received “Ds” or “Fs.” The punishment of football players included increased physical training after practice, diminished playing time, and paddling.

At Lake Kolofa, and other schools within the county’s school district, paddling was a permitted form of corporal punishment for all students, though it was not widely used. According to the staff handbook, principals and teachers, in the presence of consenting witnesses, can administer paddling “only after stringent measures such as counseling, parental conferences and other forms of discipline have failed to produce the desired results.” In the rules governing such behavior, paddling was recommended as the last resort for correcting behavior. However, according to the men I spoke to, football coaches used paddling as a first resort for taking action against their players’ unacceptable grades and misbehavior. Jarius recalled:

It starts in sixth grade for football players. An “F” is, I think, three licks, and I think a “D” is one. That’s for progress reports and report cards. They line you up. We know when it’s coming. We come down to the weight room, to the field house, and they call you out, “I need these people to line up.” We already knew what time it was. They do it in front of everybody, tryin’ to make it funny.

Paddling aroused immense fear and shame among the men I interviewed due to the physical pain it induced and because it was administered in front of the entire team. Jarius, who was paddled twice in high school, noted, “[Y]ou didn’t want that “F,” that paddlin’. You ain’t want them licks.” And Fred explained, “You had to make sure both sides [athletics and academics] were good. If it wasn’t, it’s bad news.” Because paddling, or the threat of paddling, caused such unease, it became a successful promoter of eligibility and passing grades.

Paddling also promoted what the school board and coaches defined as appropriate displays of behavior. If a football player acted out in class or had some other behavioral

difficulty, he was often punished not by one of the principals, but by his football coaches. Fred disclosed:

Not just for a bad grade. It was for anything – gettin’ in trouble in class. Oh, you’ll get pulled out of class real quick. If the teacher has a bad report, and they send it to the coaches, they’ll come right to the class and take you out. They don’t even have to ask for permission from your parents; they just do it.

As Fred illustrated, the football coaches were the overriding authority for the punishment of their players, even if the misconduct occurred outside of a football context. Thus, these men were subjected to bodily discipline for infractions that would otherwise result in less severe punishments for non-participating students.

Moreover, the coaches who exhibited a considerable amount of strength were the ones who administered the paddling, which contributed to the punishment’s fear-inducing component. Teddy told me, “They are real big dudes. They would paddle you real hard, make you change your mind about your grades, make you do better.” The unreasonable amount of force that the coaches used may have been a violation of the school board’s corporal punishment policy, which states that paddling should be reasonable, moderate, lack malicious intent, and must not be done for purposes of revenge. As Fred pointed out, “It’s been several times the wood done broke. It’s so many people gettin’ licks it just breaks.” It is unclear if any rules were, in fact, broken, but this kind of overt, aggressive punishment in sport deserves further investigation.

The men I spoke to recalled that football was the only sport that used paddling for its players, whereas other sports were more likely to use extra running and reduced playing time as punishment. When I asked Raymond why he believed that was the case, he said:

Because football you’re more disciplined, you know, and all that. Like, basketball players, they might take it the wrong way, you know? ‘Cause they ain’t used to gettin’ hit or nothin’ like that. Football players, they probably about used to it now.

For Raymond, paddling seemed more acceptable in football, as opposed to other sports, because of the sport's physically tough, overtly masculine nature. However, the school's basketball program recently received national media attention and local scrutiny for the hiring of a former coach, who was suspended from another school district for illegally assaulting his players – three of whom filed a civil rights lawsuit against their coach for the alleged abuse. It remains to be seen how his presence will influence the culture of sport and punishment at Lake Kolofa.

The use of corporal punishment and the fear of physical abuse went unquestioned by the men I interviewed. They simply believed that it worked, which illustrated their position in the coach-player power dynamic. "It might be a good idea," Raymond thought, "because once you get it the first time, you ain't gonna do it no more." Being unable to play, however, was considered a much harsher punishment. Bernard concluded:

Runnin' and paddlin', that didn't hurt, 'cause, you know, we was still able to play. Havin' to sit out, that was worse, 'cause you wanted to play every snap of the football game. They did paddle a few. They paddled them to let 'em know they still had their eyes on 'em. Those with worse grades were the ones that were punished the worst because they weren't allowed to play.

These men tolerated the use of corporal punishment because, after all, they were still eligible to play. While this abusive punishment caused physical harm and emotional stress, it paled in comparison to the notion of having to miss time on the field, which was often their escape from reality. More importantly, their athletic role was part of their collective identity, and being unable to compete would have jeopardized their distinctiveness.

Fame and Stardom

Due to the team's success and national recognition, the star players were treated like celebrities around town and in surrounding areas. This respect and appreciation had a profound

impact on their sense of self. Their athletic role became a significant, distinctive characteristic that helped foster and maintain their athletic identity. Marcus noted, “You’ll see a little kid, and he’ll be like, ‘Oh, look! There’s the quarterback!’ It’s pretty cool.”

Similar to the encouraging element of the spectacle, which evoked feelings of astonishment, these men spoke of their celebrity status in expressions of wonderment, which can be seen throughout many of the selected quotations in this section. Like Marcus, Demarius said, “Everybody knows your first name *and* last name. It’s a lot of fun.” These kinds of expressions shed light on how important and exciting this identity was to them.

Jarvis, who was highly recruited and earned many All-State honors, felt that this recognition was the greatest advantage:

The advantages are, like, when you go any place, “Man, you from Lake Kolofa? They have the best program in the state, maybe even the country.” You know, I mean, when you go somewhere, you just know, and somebody sees you have a Lake Kolofa logo on, and they see you play football, I mean, it’s just indescribable. I mean, you feel like a star.

For Jarvis, this kind of recognition was sublime. His identity as an athlete, and his connection to a well-regarded program, allowed him to “feel like a star.”

Adam felt similarly about his newfound celebrity status and recognition throughout the community.

There’s so many memories, man. Of course, winning a state championship was great. Bein’ on ESPN, feelin’ famous. You’re just thinkin’ how awesome it is when it’s all going on. I mean, you felt famous – you really did. People would see you, recognize you, and see your state championship rings. You literally felt like you were walking around with a Super Bowl ring on because everybody knew Lake Kolofa. People always wanted to stop you and ask you questions. It’s just you feel like, “Man, I’m that guy. I’m there.” Everybody knows you because of who you are on the football field.

Adam played for some of Lake Kolofa’s most successful teams, who had multiple nationally televised games, and this high level of exposure allowed him to feel like a renowned, prominent

figure in his community. Without such athletic notoriety, Adam and his teammates may not have been as well known. Adam went on to say, “It seemed like it was a ‘Friday Night Lights’ type of deal. Everybody knows who you are, what you do.”

Many of the men I interviewed mentioned markers of status – championship rings and Lake Kolofa team clothing – that highlighted their athletic prowess and identity to a certain group. “I want that gold ball back in Harbortown, Arkansas,” Demarius professed. “I want that ring on my hand to show off, and when I go somewhere.” These kinds of status markers were significant symbols of identification to these men, and they enjoyed the recognition that followed. Richie explained:

Well, being known. Everybody knows ya. If we would go around to another school, people know ya. Like, me and my cousin, we usually go to Kinneyville for their basketball games ‘cause we knew people that went to Kinneyville and people used to see us and they see we had the letterman’s jackets on or the Lake Kolofa shirts or the rings on our fingers, and they automatically know who you is.

The symbols of success were worn often, which allowed others to immediately connect them to a highly successful athletic identity.

However, this recognition was not always positive or celebrated, which became a burden for these young men, especially when they would leave their community for games or entertainment. When I asked Richie about the disadvantages of playing football at Lake Kolofa, he said:

Like I just said, being known. Some people ain’t gonna like you. People are quick to judge ya. They’re quick to judge us because they think that, like, we hear a lot of rumors. Like, we heard rumors from us recruitin’ players, we heard rumors from us bein’ on steroids, and us bein’ too old, that we got grown men playin’ on the football team. Yeah, just crazy stuff like that. We just had to deal with it, and that was the stuff I used to hate a lot when we used to go out to places. People will just judge you.

Richie came to see the downside of stardom, where not everyone that he encountered celebrated him in the way that he was used to. Some people outside of Lake Kolofa's fanbase understood the team's success as fraudulent, and he had to deal with those rumors when he traveled.

Some players felt the downside of stardom from their own fanbase. The stakes and expectations were extremely high in such a competitive environment, and the community did not hesitate to express their disgruntled frustrations after a tough loss or a poor performance by a key player. Marcus, who served as the starting quarterback for two seasons, expressed to me the disadvantages of participating in such a competitive program:

The disadvantages are that everybody expects you to win every game. It doesn't matter if you're playing the number one team in the nation; no matter if you're playing a JUCO, or D-I, or playing [a team from the Southeastern Conference], they expect you to win every week. And, if you lose, it's not acceptable. I mean, they pretty much shun you around town until you win the next week. If you do lose, you have to win the next week.

As the offensive leader of the team, he received much of the criticism. At times, the backlash moved beyond simple shunning and became personal in its scope. Marcus explained the breadth of this hostility:

They cuss you. It's bad. Sometimes on the Internet. Nobody's ever like tweeted me or posted on my [Facebook] wall cussin' me, but, like, just walkin' off the field, you'll hear people in the stands yellin', "You suck," or, "You're a P-O-S!" It's like you meant to throw the interception. And some of the things that my parents tell me about that they hear up in the stands, it's just horrible.

Marcus's athletic identity and formation of self was challenged from the backlash directed toward such perceived failure. In the event of a loss, public shaming became one more challenge for these student-athletes.

While football stardom had its ups and downs, there was no greater loss than when their athletic identity was no longer part of their current life. The men that I spoke to who were no longer playing football spoke fondly about their "glory days" of football participation – a game-

saving tackle, a long run for a touchdown, or, simply, the camaraderie that sport offered – and they felt lost without that direct connection to interscholastic sports. Bernard, who chose an academic route after high school, recalled his worst memory from high school:

Well, you know, my last high school football game. And the only reason why is because I won't be able to play high school football anymore. I just knew that was it. That was the worst feeling ever. I mean, what are we supposed to do after this? 'Cause, I mean, football is over with. Just to know that it was over with was the worst feeling ever. It was hard to take it in.

Bernard felt a significant attachment to his athletic identity, but once his senior season came to a premature end in the semifinals of the playoffs, he was unsure what he was supposed to do next. It was a difficult loss for him to cope with.

When compared to the physical abuse that these men endured for poor grades and misbehavior, this public celebration and relative fame was, in many ways, its polar opposite. The fame and stardom of participation helped foster their athletic identity. It became, aside from winning, one of the most exciting parts of being a member of Lake Kolofa's football team. Consequently, as the fame evaporated, their athletic identity subsequently became challenged, which was difficult to cope with as these men looked forward to the future. During the moment, however, it was an extraordinary feeling.

Conclusion

Like Singer (2008) found in his study of collegiate football players, these men were faced with significant academic challenges due to time and physical demands of participation. These demands are often more noticeable – and arguably more exploitative – in college athletics, but they were also present in the competitive high school football environment that I researched. The star players, who received more attention from their own coaches and college recruiters, faced

even more pronounced distractions. Also, as seniors, they took on heightened leadership roles that placed them at odds with their academic roles. However, like May (2009) found in an ethnographic study of high school basketball, athletic participation kept some of these young men focused on school and on path to graduate. May found that sport participation can keep young African American men in school, which increases their chances of earning a diploma and making them more likely to be able to achieve further educational attainment. My research supports May's findings, but it extends his work by focusing on how elite levels of competition can complicate the academic role.

VII. LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Most of the men I interviewed were young, and they were still following their dreams of playing collegiate sports. Some of these men held strongly to their goals of one day making it to the professional levels of sport, while others viewed their participation more realistically, with the goal of simply earning a free education. The older men that I interviewed had moved into different life stages, where new occupations and families occupied much of their time. Collectively, their stories shed light on the broad range of experiences that elite high school athletes encounter, both during and after participation. However, as different as some of their stories are, one theme remained constant: sport presented these men with opportunities that would have otherwise not existed in their rural community.

What Are They Doing Now?

Five men – Demarius, Jarvis, Marcus, Raymond, and Teddy – had recently earned athletic scholarships and had signed letters of intent to compete at a variety of schools in the region. Their college careers have now already begun, as they began taking summer courses and participating in workouts at the beginning of June. Demarius, who experienced subtle racism in sport and noticed the differences for black athletes in football and baseball, signed a letter of intent to play baseball at a nearby junior college, with the hopes of one day being drafted by a Major League Baseball team. His decision to pursue baseball after being considered one of the

best defensive football players in the state was surprising for his family and friends. When I asked him if any fans were upset with his decision, he said:

Yeah, I mean, like, I got a couple of ‘em. They were mad at me at first, but then they noticed that – when they saw, uh, Jacoby Ellsbury, who went to the Yankees, with a 153 million dollar contract, you know, a lot of people’s eyes woke up. They were like, “Oh, you made the right decision.” So, that’s how that went.

Demarius’s favorite sport was baseball, and he felt like his smaller size – he stood 5’10” – would be more conducive for a potential career in that sport. When those close to him heard about the monstrous contracts that exist in baseball today, they became comfortable with his decision.

Jarvis was considered one of the best high school linebackers in the region. When we spoke, he was wearing a shirt from a recent all-star game in which he played, a nod to the numerous success and praise he received as a high school football player. In addition, he was named first team All-State after his junior and senior seasons. This kind of recognition helped Jarvis receive a scholarship offer from a Division-I program, which happened to be his only significant offer – aside from all of the junior colleges in the region – even though six other Division-I programs actively recruited him. He received a phone call from his future head coach on National Signing Day, which brought tears of joy to him, his mother, and his girlfriend, who were with him at the time. When I asked Jarvis if he still had dreams to play in the NFL, he confessed, “I still do. It’s been a goal. Every kid dreams of playing football and making it to the League. And I’m still workin’ on that. It’s still my main goal.”

Marcus, the all-state quarterback who held a 4.0 grade point average, signed a scholarship to become the starting quarterback at one of the best junior colleges in the region, though this result was disappointing to him. Marcus had been highly recruited, but one day all of the letters and text messages stopped coming in, and he was not sure why. Marcus explained:

I started gettin' some looks about ninth grade. I mean, I was at a small school in ninth and tenth grade, so I didn't really get that many looks. Last year, I had a really good season. I had a really good receiver. I threw for over 2,500 yards and 29 touchdowns. I had a pretty good season. I was gettin' some looks. I was gettin' some letters from LSU, Alabama. I don't know if they just stopped talkin' to me, or if the coaches had somethin' to do with it, but they stopped – everything stopped coming in. I was gettin' some letters from some smaller D-I programs; they just stopped coming in – everything stopped coming in. I was gettin' some from Ole Miss, from Texas A&M – everything just stopped, and right, like, I had nothing. I mean, like, no coaches were even talking to me, but like a week before signing day I had four offers.

Marcus went on to explain that, historically, very few quarterbacks from Lake Kolofa have ever gone on to compete for top college football programs, which may have hurt him during recruitment. He also felt that his head coach might have stood in the way of his recruitment. He said:

I think something – I mean, 'cause it all has to go through the head coach, and the head coach's son was the backup quarterback, and I think he wanted him to be the first quarterback to go to a big school.

When prominent college football programs are no longer in the picture, junior colleges sometimes become the next desired destination. Here, football players are able to hone their skills, earn college credit, and are continued to be recruited by Division-I programs. The junior college where Marcus signed a letter of intent, according to the men I spoke to, has previously done an outstanding job of placing their football players into respectable college football programs. When we spoke, Marcus remained hopeful about his chances and hoped to one day become an NFL quarterback.

Like those above, Raymond and Teddy also had dreams of becoming professional athletes. Teddy and Raymond had just signed scholarships to play football at nearby junior colleges. Teddy's goals were clear: "There's not a day that goes by that I don't see myself playin' in the NFL. I feel like if I keep on workin', playin', and strivin', I could be one of those

guys that's on TV that I once watched when I was younger." His closest family members, who present him with monetary rewards as motivation to continue following his dream, have partially kept Teddy's dream alive. Teddy explained, "Yeah, I've got four older brothers and I've got cousins and they try to make bets to make me go harder. I don't know what it is. Really, once you see the cash, you be like, 'Oh, man, I gotta keep on doin' that.'"

Raymond's family also encourages him to continue his pursuit of becoming a professional football player. Raymond said, "Yeah, I got a cousin. He plays at Lake Kolofa, and he always talks to me about it. Even now, he's still talkin' about it. Like, 'Don't never give up on it. Even if you don't make it, at least try. At least you'll get your school paid for and everything.'" For Raymond, earning a full athletic scholarship became one of the greatest advantages of his participation. "The way it helped me is it got me a scholarship," Raymond explained. "I ain't gotta pay for school now. That's a big help. I ain't gotta worry about my momma, worrying about, 'Can I go to college?' or have to take out a loan or anything."

Raymond's goals did, however, extend beyond college scholarships and into professional levels of football. The thought of achieving such success was difficult for him to dismiss as some unattainable, unrealistic goal, for it was always in the back of his mind. "I be thinkin' about it, but, I mean, you know how they say only 1 out of 10 make it, or whatever they say? I mean, hopefully I get to be one out of ten," Raymond confessed. He understood that the chances of successfully making it to the NFL would not be easy, and he was not defeated by those chances. However, he greatly underestimated the likelihood of achieving such athletic success. Even after not being recruited by top colleges and only receiving one scholarship offer, he still hoped that he could beat those odds.

I also interviewed three current college football players. For these men, the dream to play professionally was not as pronounced as it once may have been when they were leaving Harbortown to begin their college athletic careers. Richie, who had multiple family members play in the NFL, once thought that he could follow in their footsteps. However, he was approaching and preparing for his final season in college when we spoke over the phone. He had begun thinking about what he would do next in life. He realized that a professional career was not nearly as attainable as he once thought, so he had decided to keep his options open outside of sport. After starting his academic career as an undecided student, he ultimately chose to major in sociology, where his goal became to better understand the world in which he lived and to become a resource for disadvantaged black youth. “I like workin’ with kids, helpin’ them get on the right path so they won’t have to go through the same stuff I had to go through,” Richie said. “And even if they do, I want to teach them how to block it out and ignore some of the stuff, ‘cause it’s still here.” Looking back on his experience, Richie felt fortunate to have been able to play football. He told me:

It gave me an opportunity to go to school, ‘cause that’s all that matters in the end. That’s all that matters anyway. I mean, you can go to school – I’m playin’ football and that’s what I love to do – but really all I’m here for is to get an education, you know, just in case football doesn’t work out because there ain’t no guarantees ‘cause you can get hurt just like that. And if you get hurt, what else are you gonna fall back on? So, it’s always important to get that education.

Football gave Richie an opportunity to go to college, which may not have otherwise been possible. He once thought that a professional football career was what he most desired, but he came to see himself as someone who could have a major impact in disadvantaged communities – much like the ones in which he was raised. Looking back on his football career, he did not feel as if he failed to reach his goal of becoming a professional football player. Instead, Richie believed

that football, and the free education that subsequently followed, helped him reach heights that he never once imagined for himself.

Fred and Jarius, two men who played together in high school and went to the same junior college on football scholarships, both struggled to maintain the grades they needed in high school to attend a Division-I program. They ended up at the same local junior college program with the initial dream of honing their skills for two years while remaining actively recruited by larger programs. I interviewed them together at a restaurant in their college town, and, when we spoke, they shared similar views on how they imagined their futures in sport. Jarius once thought he could play in the NFL. That dream was mostly alive in junior high when he had two family members who were playing big-time college football. As his senior season came to a close, he had only received little attention from college scouts. On national signing day, he only had two offers: one came from a Division-I program, but his ACT scores were too low for him to enroll; the other offer came from a local junior college, which is where he decided to continue his athletic career. When we spoke, his goal was to earn his Associate's degree and become a police officer in Harbortown.

Fred had a similar experience. He once felt that he could play in the NFL, but, as he got older, those dreams faded as he realized how difficult it would be to achieve such success. Fred explained:

Oh, yeah, I thought about it, too, 'cause you hear about so many people from Lake Kolofa goin' to the League, so it was like that chance – that little spark of hope – that maybe I can go, but once I got to high school, you realize that the odds are very slim. For me, especially with my height, so, I was like, if I make it, I make it, and if I don't, I don't wanna be upset about it. It's just one of them dreams everyone has as a kid. It was more reasonable to think I could play in college.

Fred, after coming to a more realistic view of his chances of playing professionally, still hoped to attend a Division-I school on a football scholarship after his two years in junior college.

Fred's goal was not to use college football as a path to professional stardom, but as a way to pay for his education. Fred explained his stance:

Football's been good to us. I always looked at it like, if I'm gonna put all my time into a sport then, if it's free and I'm gonna put all my time into it and I'm gonna be used to the point where I can't move anymore, then I'm gonna use it back. Like, I'm gonna take out what they takin' out of me. I'm gonna use all the free resources I can and scholarships and all that to my advantage to get an education.

Fred noted that football was a positive force in his life, but he did, however, hint at the exploitative nature of sport. He felt that sport participation took a lot out of him, both physically and mentally, so he wanted to take full advantage of his opportunity. For Fred, that was the opportunity to have the cost of his college education covered.

The four remaining men that I interviewed – David, Adam, Bernard, and Quinton – were no longer playing football when I interviewed them. Their playing days had come and gone, but they looked back on their participation with fond memories. David, who experienced a brief professional career, was working as a mental health technician in Harbortown when we spoke. David, an All-America selection, was widely considered the number one prospect in the state of Arkansas during his senior season. After being recruited by a number of Big Ten and Big 12 football programs, David ultimately chose to stay closer to home. He signed a letter of intent to play for an up-and-coming program in the NCAA's Southeastern Conference, where he joined three of his cousins who also played at Lake Kolofa. After college, he became an undrafted free agent, and played in the NFL for a few seasons. After his brief career, David returned to Harbortown and began working in healthcare. When I asked him how football has impacted his life, he said, "I mean, it took me to heights I never thought I would get to, as far as meetin' a lot

of different people and playin' professionally a little bit and makin' friends." Football taught him to be a leader and an example in everything that he does, and he uses that mentality in not only his new occupational role, but also his role as a father. That latter role is, in his opinion, his greatest accomplishment outside of sport. "Just, for me, bein' in the lives of my four kids," David said. "That's what I'm most proud of. Just bein' able to be there for my kids."

Adam, however, longed for a return to the gridiron. "I've done a lot of things," he said, "but nothing has ever met my need like football has." Adam quit the high school team during his senior season after a dispute with a new head coach, which dropped him off the college scouting radar. Upon graduating from high school, he joined the military, served two deployments in Afghanistan, earned an honorable discharge, and became a police officer in Harbortown. However, at the age of 23, he had still not given up his dream of pursuing football collegiately and professionally. Adam confessed, "I mean, that's still one of my dreams, you know, goin' back and playin' ball and seein' where I could go. Of course, the baby girl and the wife, all that kind of slows things down but it doesn't stop you." When we spoke, Adam had dreams of trying out for a local junior college team. He kept himself in great physical condition, and felt as though it was a realistic opportunity. As he noted, his new occupation and role as a husband and father stood in the way of his goals, but they did not stop him. His identity as a football player still lingered, and he yearned for an opportunity to return to interscholastic sports.

Bernard's mother passed away during his senior year of high school. He recalled how his mother always stressed the importance of education, and it became his goal to become the first person in his family to graduate from college. Bernard said, "So, me being able to graduate from high school without a mother and keep goin', go to college, and be able to graduate from a university, man, that's the biggest accomplishment of my life." Bernard ultimately earned two

degrees in criminal justice and became a police officer in Harbortown. To his delight, he is part of the police escort that charters the team to its away games. For home games, he sits in the stands every Friday night where he cheers on his younger cousins. In these ways, Bernard is able to stay connected to the sport he loves.

Quinton, the oldest of the men I spoke to, also found a way to stay connected to the Lake Kolofa football program as a coach. Long before he became a coach, Quinton played on Lake Kolofa's first state championship team. He played with many men who went on to compete for top college football programs and, eventually, the NFL. His exposure to big-time college scouts once allowed him to believe that he could experience the same success as his teammates. He nearly did, but he cited his short stature as a hindrance to his recruitment. To his delight, however, he was still able to play at the junior college level: "[Junior college] was amazing to me. From day one, I loved the smell of the locker room, the grass, everything about it. It was something I wanted to do. I was always told I was too little, but never by the [junior college] coaches." Football had a major impact on Quinton's life, and after he finished junior college he became a peewee coach for Harbortown's youth and, later, a position coach for the high school team, allowing him to have a different type of sporting career. He said, "I love doin' what I'm doin' now. I love workin' with the peewee team and the high school team. I wouldn't change anything. I get to see these kids grow up, and I like that." Quinton, who was born and raised in Harbortown and played on some of Lake Kolofa's most accomplished teams, has a valuable perspective to offer the youth and he tries to use this knowledge to mentor the youth who face the biggest life challenges.

Conclusion: The Impact of Football

Participating in football had a significant impact on these men, and they believed that the values they acquired through sport participation offered them an advantage in life. Many of these life lessons were discussed in terms of sport analogies, which highlights sport's important role in their lives and the extent of their engulfment in the athletic role. Quinton explained, "It showed me life is like being on a team. You know, when things aren't goin' your way, you know, adversity, keep fightin'. It might turn out to be in your favor. You gotta give it your best shot." Or, as Demarius noted, "You know, you can't let the game beat ya. You have to slow the game down, which is life, and then you gotta battle everything out. You can't just say, 'Oh, it defeated me; I'll just let it go.' Like, 'Okay. What can I do to get better at that?'"

Some of these men used their athletic skills in their future occupations. Adam noted, "You know, with football, everybody had a chance, and I believe in second chances. Bein' there showed me that. It helps you mature. It helps you think about things a lot better. That's what it did for me. It's given me some values, and it really helped me in the military." Other men, who had yet to enter life after football, understood football's role in preparing them for the future.

Richie explained:

It taught me a lot of stuff. It taught me to be physically and mentally tough. It taught me how to take criticism, 'cause we got criticized a lot. It taught me leadership. Football teaches you a lot of stuff. It's a lot of stuff football teaches you that people don't understand or don't even know. Like, I tell some people to put their child in football. First off, they say "no" 'cause they don't want their child to get hurt, but they ain't thinkin' about all the stuff they can learn. You know, they can teach you respect, how to respect somebody that's over you, how to get yelled at, 'cause you gonna get fussed at by your coaches. You might have a job one day and you got a boss that just likes to yell, so you already know how to deal with it because you've been doin' it for four years in high school and four years in college. Yeah, so, football teaches you a lot of stuff.

For Richie, the mental components of sport participation were equally as important as the physical aspects. The physicality of sport ultimately helped these men as they progressed into their college football roles, but the mental preparedness and toughness of sport were transferrable to other occupational pursuits. As Jarius noted, “Lake Kolofa can grow you up real quick.”

The opportunities extended to these men from their participation in sport were due, in large part, from their culmination of athletic cultural capital. Despite some of their setbacks, these men were able to use the skills they garnered in high school in their future pursuits, where most of them earned college scholarships, attended college debt-free, had successful college careers, and later applied their experiences to new occupations. Due to their association and recognition with a high-profile football program, their exposure to numerous college scouts, and their relationships with many former Lake Kolofa football players who played big-time college football and professional football, these men understood how to adequately plan for their next step in life. While not all of them reached – or will reach – their ultimate goal of playing in the NFL, their participation in sport did provide them with immediate, transferrable benefits.

VIII: DISCUSSION

The collective spectacle of Lake Kolofa football, with all of its allure and glamour, drew these men into sport at a young age. This spectacle worked in tandem with other sources of encouragement, and it provided first-hand visibility of athletic opportunity. The opportunity to succeed in collegiate or professional sports became the most visible path to achieving success. This opportunity, however, was, as most sports are, structured by class, race, and gender. Many of these men used football as a way to escape from poverty and the daily stressors of their home lives. This space provided much needed camaraderie and ego-enhancement, and due to the football program's appearance as a race-neutral meritocracy, where racial discrimination for participants was minimized, these men found a safe, welcoming space in an otherwise racially hostile context. Unlike baseball, which had become a white space with racial biases, football provided a departure from the day-to-day racial injustices and intolerances that plagued many of their academic and athletic experiences. While these men faced many personal challenges throughout their experience, one aspect of sport remained constant: sport had the ability to provide them with opportunities that seemingly did not exist for non-participants. These men were able to use sport in such a way that kept them out of trouble and kept them alive in a tough place to live. If they worked hard enough, these men felt that that they could earn a free education and possibly a future professional sporting career, which often felt like their only ticket out of their community. The culmination of their unique athletic experiences – high-profile

exposure, nationally televised games, and visits from famous college football coaches – allowed these men to ultimately view their dreams as apparent realities.

This pursuit, however, proved to be a daunting task. The time and physical demands of participation introduced many barriers that made being an exceptional athlete and a remarkable student seem at odds with each other. These men felt as though they had to choose one path or the other, that they could be a great athlete or a great student, but not both at one time. As elite competitors, they were faced with high athletic expectations, and they often participated in football-related activities multiple hours each day, which felt like a job to them. While sport participation did help some of them stay on track to graduate, maintaining the school-sport balance proved to be an arduous function of the academic setting. This responsibility was more pronounced for key players, who simultaneously had to balance their own college recruitment with a heightened expectation to be team leaders, while being bombarded with lowered academic expectations and tougher courses. These identities ultimately resulted in the common student-athlete role identity conflict, where the athletic identity received more salience than their scholarly roles. Through their complete engulfment in their athletic identity (Adler and Adler 1991), these men were placed under severe institutional constraints and demands. With the focus on eligibility over academic growth, they often found themselves waiting to be physically punished and abused for their inability to adequately maintain presentable grades. However, the fame, stardom, and newfound celebrity offset the negative aspects of participation and fostered their engulfment in the athletic role. Above the rest, the most difficult aspect of participation was the relinquishment of their athletic identity, and many men chose to continue their pursuit down the only path they knew.

This path provided a multitude of opportunities, even if they did not ultimately meet their goal of becoming a professional athlete. Sport offered the chance at a free education and an opportunity to flee the hardship of their poverty-ridden community. Perhaps more important than the favorable circumstances for an escape, these men were provided with an emotional escape from a racist environment, where other avenues for successful participation were symbolically blocked off and inaccessible. The football program was their surrogate family, which offered brotherhood and mentorship, and shielded them from racial intolerance and guided them through their academic and athletic experiences. The seemingly viable path of football prosperity seemed open and attainable. These men were pulled like a magnet, and they were unable to resist the powerful, formidable forces that the pursuit of sport presented to them.

This pursuit, however, was largely an illusion. Similar to Adler and Adler's (1991) concluding remarks, these men were, in many ways, socialized to fail. They spent their formative teenage years chasing a dream that most men and women, including themselves, will never achieve, which is the elusive professional sporting career. Through their narrowly focused, specialized pursuit of football, these men abandoned other sources of achievement that may have provided more favorable conditions for success. Those who do make it beyond high school and earn a college athletic scholarship, like nearly all of my research participants did, will experience a few more years of their childhood dreams, and their end will only come slightly later in life. These men are often left, to the outside eye, with little to show for their tireless pursuit.

However, their experience was highly valuable despite their years of grueling physical and emotional anguish. These men shared few regrets with me and they did not feel exploited or let down by the sport that simultaneously offered so much, but returned so little. They were the subjects of national media attention, which resulted in local fame and stardom that most of their

classmates and peers will never experience. Sport also provided them with a skillset that was transferable to many facets of their life, and they looked back on their experiences with fond memories.

These findings largely confirm previous literature about the opportunity structures facing black youth today. The media, which ultimately socialize young, black men to see a narrowly focused world, worked in tandem with the collective spectacle of sport to draw these young men into the allure of a future professional sporting career. This career appeared as if it were the only accessible path, and this is in due in large part to football's existence as a race- and class-based opportunity.

The scope of my findings extended beyond my initial research questions, but those questions still remain important to this project, and I believe that my research provides the necessary answers. My first research question asked, "How do high school athletes, especially those with collegiate and professional sport aspirations, experience encouragement to play sports from kin and non-kin groups?" I found that those athletes with collegiate and professional sport aspirations did experience different levels of encouragement from kin and non-kin groups. While their families played a paramount role in presenting sport as a viable option, they were often the first ones to remind the young participants that education should come first. These families, for the most part, promoted academic growth and placed greater importance on the academic role. Some families did, however, place an importance on achieving success through sport and not through academics. Moreover, some of these men had older brothers and cousins who experienced a considerable amount of athletic success, which encouraged them to pursue sport to a similar extent.

Their coaches, who were under institutional demands to field a competitive football team, more often promoted a lowered set of academic standards, with an importance placed on athletic eligibility over academic growth. The allure of athletic stardom, coupled with the time and physical demands of participation, gave salience to the former approach. While these men believed that education was important, most of them failed to ultimately have the proper grades needed for a Division-I football scholarship. Furthermore, their coaches helped foster their engulment in athletics, allowing academics to become the means to eligibility and further football stardom.

My second research question asked, “Does participation in an elite high school football program have detrimental effects on the academic development of participating athletes?” My findings to this question answer Singer’s (2008) call for more attention on the benefits and detriments of participation in high school interscholastic sports. The men I interviewed faced many similar challenges as those from Singer’s qualitative assessment of big-time college football participation. Framed under the school-sport balance, the men I interviewed largely failed to adequately balance their divergent athletic and academic roles. In many ways, the term “student-athlete” proved to be an inaccurate description, as it failed to appropriately define their constrained role. The time and physical demands of elite participation ultimately had a detrimental effect on their academic development, and the multiple channels of influence – from kin and non-kin groups – that informed their decisions, compounded this development.

My third research question asked, “How does participation in a revenue generating sport, like football, affect aspirations for social mobility?” I found that the spectacle of Lake Kolofa football greatly affected their aspirations for achieving social mobility through sport. The immense success of previous individuals, who had gone on to compete at a major college

football programs and enjoyed future NFL careers, allowed these men to believe that they could achieve similar success, and some of them did. During recruitment, the presence of Southern college football's most recognizable faces brought these men face-to-face with the attraction of major athletic achievement, making the visibility of opportunity seem more accessible in no other area than sport. This national recruiting attention, coupled with nationally televised Friday night games, gave these men a sense of social mobility and they held on to their childhood dreams slightly longer than most youth. Despite their own lack of national attention from college scouts, most of these men still believed that they could have a professional sporting career.

My fourth, and final, research question asked, "Does the encouragement for participation in sports from either kin or non-kin groups lead to the social reproduction of social class?" However, without longitudinal data, it is difficult to determine whether or not social reproduction has occurred. In addition, the athletic and academic exploitation of my interviewees is equally as difficult to assess. While these men were certainly subjected to exploitative forces, they retained many highly valuable components of participation. Perhaps more importantly, these men felt as though sport was a very positive, if not the most positive, aspect of their lives. Some of these men may be able to use their acquired skills in future pursuits, as I noted in the previous section, while others may ultimately abandon their athletic identities altogether.

While my participants believed that sport participation was a cherished aspect of their formative years, and all of these men said that they would allow their own children to participate in football, I believe that exploitation did occur. Their stories largely reflect how young, black men, with a wealth of athletic talent, become the spectacle of sport. Their high school institution, which undoubtedly profited greatly off of the entertainment that these men created, placed considerable institutional demands, which favored athletic eligibility over academic growth,

upon these men and forced them to focus more heavily on their athletic role. Consequently, these men were physically punished and abused for adhering to those institutional demands.

My main findings extend the research with which my project is situated into new, exciting directions. My conceptualization of the collective spectacle of sport allows for a new understanding of how young men, especially those who participate on feeder teams for elite programs, come to experience encouragement for participation and their chances of achieving social mobility. This analysis favors a race- and class-based structural argument, which removes some of the often-unwarranted blame placed at the feet of African American individuals, families, and communities. Moreover, the understanding of revenue generating sports as racialized safe spaces allows for an added explanation as to why and how certain groups find sanctuary and acceptance in sporting institutions, even if exploitation is occurring. Furthermore, the notion of athletic cultural capital acknowledges how elite levels of interscholastic sport affords participants a considerable amount of status, power, and specialized expertise, which are often further applied to sporting endeavors or converted into other forms of cultural capital, if not economic capital.

My findings are not generalizable to all high school football participants or programs. Lake Kolofa is, in many ways, a unique sporting institution, whose athletes experience formal and informal institutional demands that most high school athletes never face. These findings do, however, shed light on the experiences of elite high school athletes in highly competitive interscholastic programs, which, outside of football, receive little academic attention.

Moving forward, future research should continue to investigate the role of physical punishment and abuse in sport, as well its role in shaping group dynamics. As a ritual of authority, it may meet the symbolic needs of both coaches and players. For coaches, this use of

surveillance allows for greater control, and in a sport that currently has a majority black presence, this punishment may be a way to police black masculinity. For players, who are the subjects of such bodily control, it may result in a form of group cohesion, as they must endure both the ups and downs of participation together. To this date, however, few studies address this pressing concern.

Also of importance are longitudinal qualitative studies that can continue to complement the numerous quantitative studies being done on both youth and high school sports participation. These kinds of studies would allow for more definitive remarks about the nature of exploitation, social reproduction, and social mobility in sport, which take years to adequately identify and properly explain.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Race	Occupation/ Status
Adam	23	White	Police officer
Bernard	30	Black/African American	Police officer
David	31	Black/African American	Mental health technician
Demarius	18	Black/African American	College baseball signee
Fred	20	Black/African American	College football player
Jarius	19	Black/African American	College football player
Jarvis	18	Black/African American	College football signee
Marcus	18	White	College football signee
Quinton	38	Black/African American	Warehouse supervisor / Coach
Raymond	18	Black/African American	College football signee
Richie	21	Black/African American	College football player
Teddy	18	Black/African American	College football signee

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When did you start playing football? Do you remember how you got started?
2. Who encouraged you to play football? Who discouraged you?
3. How did you become involved with *Lake Kolofa* football?
4. Describe the typical schedule during football season.
5. What are some of your best memories from participating in high school football?
6. What are some of your worst memories from participating in high school football?
7. How important was education for you while you were playing football?
8. How important was education for your coaches while you were playing football?
9. Did you ever feel like you had to focus more on sports than your education? Or did you ever feel like you were being asked to do so?
10. Did you ever feel like you had to focus more on your education than sports?
11. What were the advantages of playing football at *Lake Kolofa*?
12. What were the disadvantages of playing football at *Lake Kolofa*?
13. What were your goals as a football player? What were you hoping to become?
14. Did you have aspirations to play football in college or professionally? If so, did anyone close to you push you in that direction?
15. Were you or any of your teammates recruited to play college football? What was that process like? How early did that recruitment occur?
16. How has football impacted your life? In what ways has it helped you? Did you have to sacrifice anything for football?
17. If you could do it all over again, is there anything that you would change?
18. What are you doing now?

19. If you had children, would you encourage them to pursue football to the same extent that you did? Why or why not?
20. Is there too much emphasis on playing sports in school nowadays?
21. Do you think college athletes should be paid? Why or why not?
22. Is there anything about your experience we haven't discussed that you would like to add?

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your race and/or ethnicity?
 - a. White, not Hispanic
 - b. Black, not Hispanic
 - c. Hispanic
 - d. Asian
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - f. Other
 - g. Mixed race
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Some high school
 - b. High school
 - c. Some college
 - d. Associate's Degree
 - e. Bachelor's Degree
 - f. Master's Degree or higher
4. What is your occupation?

5. Is there anything else you think is important for us to know about your experience with high school sports?

VITA

Noah Stephen Webb graduated from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August of 2011 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology. He began his sociology graduate coursework in August of 2012 under his graduate advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Jackson. He worked as a graduate teaching assistant during his two years at the University of Mississippi and, under the guidance of Dr. John Green, worked on numerous research projects for the University's Center for Population Studies. He will attend Florida State University for his doctorate in sociology starting in August of 2014.