

RHETORIC, RACE, AND BASKETBALL

Madeline J. Janicki (Jonathan P. Rossing, PhD)

Department of Communication Studies
School of Liberal Arts
Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)
Indianapolis, IN 46220

Public discourse surrounding professional sports like the NBA shapes how society views the game, the athletes, and other social issues such as race (Belson 2011, & Rupert 2011). Researchers have argued that the rhetoric surrounding basketball—a sport predominantly played by black players and viewed by white fans—reveals expectations on black individuals to fit into a white society and creates a modern day colonialism (Ebanda B’beri & Hogarth 2009). In order for black players to be marketable to a white audience they must not only meet the expectations of white society but exceed them (Lavelle 2010).

This research studies the discourse surrounding the recent NBA lockout in order to analyze the racial meaning and arguments that informed the conversation. The study analyzes public discourse about the NBA lockout, including news articles, editorials, and material posted by fans on the internet in response to the lockout. It uses rhetorical methods such as studying narratives of the fans. The recurring rhetorical patterns show how white fans view themselves in relation to black athletes, and white team owners. The narratives also subtly framed players and owners as slaves and slave masters, respectively. These descriptions reveal racially coded meanings that recall historical divisions, expose oppressive attitudes, and illuminate the continuing hold of racism in society. The findings contribute not only to the body of research on sports discourse and society but also to ongoing critical race scholarship that challenges contemporary racism.

Bilson K. (2011, August 3). In Defense of Its Lockout N.B.A. Sues the Union. *The New York Times* <http://www.lexisnexus.com>

Ebanda de B’beri, B., & Hogarth, P. (2009). White America’s construction of Black bodies: The case of Ron Artest as a model of covert racial ideology in the NBA’s discourse. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 2(2), 89-106.

Lavelle, K. (2010). A critical discourse analysis of Black masculinity in NBA game commentary. *The Howard Journal of Communications* 21, 294-314.

Rupert M. (2011, December 8). The NBA: Where Racism Happens? *The New York Times Company* <http://www.lexisnexus.com>