**For the Black Athlete, Diversity and Inclusion Still the Elephant in Room**
by Mark Robinson

In 1980, Dick Gregory spoke at Pierce College about a subject called diversity and, although I was a young teenager, his message was dynamic. A few years later, I saw reports on the news regarding Jessie Jackson tackling the issue of diversity on the corporate level. It seemed to me that, when certain companies had matters that pertain to hiring practices of African-Americans, they would bring Jackson in to train staff and management.



Dr. Mark Robinson

We now live in a world attempting to deliver a conscious effort of diversity daily. The idea of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each is unique and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each.

However, in college sports, we are missing many of the key elements associated with the concept of diversity.

Since 1980, the area of diversity has grown to include the philosophy of Inclusion. According to the NCAA, inclusion is the process of creating an environment that not only recognizes and appreciates the talents, skills and perspectives of every individual, but uses those skills to reach educational and organizational objectives. Diversity and inclusion are intended to improve the learning environment for all student-athletes and enhance excellence within the NCAA.

Most of the individuals involved in sports view diversity and inclusion as a tool to measure hiring practices among head coaches, the hiring of senior-level athletic administrators, as well as promote an inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation. The lack of diverse hiring at the top has a direct correlation to the lack of understanding of the concept of diversity and inclusion and the Black athlete. The idea of diversity and inclusion in understanding the Black athlete’s issues and the challenges associated with sports participation continues to be the elephant in the room.

According to Dr. Harry Edwards, when O.J Simpson was asked to take a stance in the civil rights movement, his response was, “I am not Black, I am O.J.,” implying being a gifted athlete provided him with immunity or entitlement on a societal scale. Today, the Black athlete is plagued with issues concerning graduation rates, increased arrest rates of current and former athletes, as well as a host of social and behavioral problems.

If we examine the purpose and meaning of diversity and inclusion, specifically focusing on the Black athlete, we need to ask and answer the following:

* Do we believe the Black athlete is unique and are we recognizing the individual differences?

* Are Black athletes entering college from a different socioeconomic status?

* Do we invest in exploration of these differences and provide a safe, positive and nurturing environment?

* Are we striving to improve the learning environment for all student-athletes?

* Have we taken a stance to move beyond simple tolerance or are we only staying in line with O.J.’s response by removing the “Black” in the Black athlete?

Dismissing the Black in Black athlete gives collegiate officials a reason to ignore the issues and challenges facing this diverse population. Black athletes’ personal development needs differ from the needs of other athlete populations; however, we are witnessing a lack of awareness and possible conscious neglect.

This lack of knowledge or neglect displays a failure to recognize the need for diversity and inclusion training on understanding the Black athlete. The inability to train has resulted in a failure for staff members and coaches to provide personal development. Personal development for the athlete is considered Personal Player Development (PPD) — it’s the process of taking a personal approach with a player and developing that player.

The fundamental pillars of PPD are personal, social and professional development. These posts are supported by athletic identity and leadership and decision-making. These missing developmental pieces are needed to prepare the Black athlete adequately for short- and long-term success academically, socially and behaviorally. Resisting this approach and associated topics could explain the rise in arrest rates, low academic success and critical roadblocks when exiting sport for Black athletes.

This school year, collegiate athletic departments will spend thousands of dollars bringing in campus speakers and investing in the latest technology for their respected departments. These same institutions will also spend dollars in LGBTQ training, sexual assault, and domestic violence training for athletes and staff. But very few, if any, will invest in diversity and inclusion training for coaches, athletes and employees in the area of personal player development, specifically targeting the Black athlete population.

Many experts in the mental health field have recently begun making a case for the desperate need of mental health services in athletics. I would agree to some extent. Yes, daily stressors neglected over time can promote a need for mental health services, but it’s the blatant neglect of regular engagement with Black athletes, in the area of personal player development, which brings on the need for clinical mental health services.

The dismissal of the diversity and Inclusion training in the personal player development arena targeting the Black athlete has resulted in coaches and administrators being removed from their jobs. As well as negative media coverage, countless numbers of lawsuits from survivors and the underpreparing of Black athlete for the real world.

Therefore, a simple solution would be to provide athletic personnel with adequate training in the area of personal player development needs and engage with Black athletes regularly in the field of personal growth. This approach will increase graduation rates, and reduce social and behavioral problems while minimizing clinical mental health-related issues. Thus, producing a holistically healthy, balanced and championship-caliber Black athlete.

Finally, my encounter with Dick Gregory was 36 years ago. Since that time, we have identified the problem, we know who has the problem, but continue ignoring the solution. It’s time for college athletic departments to wake up and step up. Who is going to be the leader and mandate necessary training and programming to ensure Black athletes have success academically, socially and behaviorally at the same rate as their peers?

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