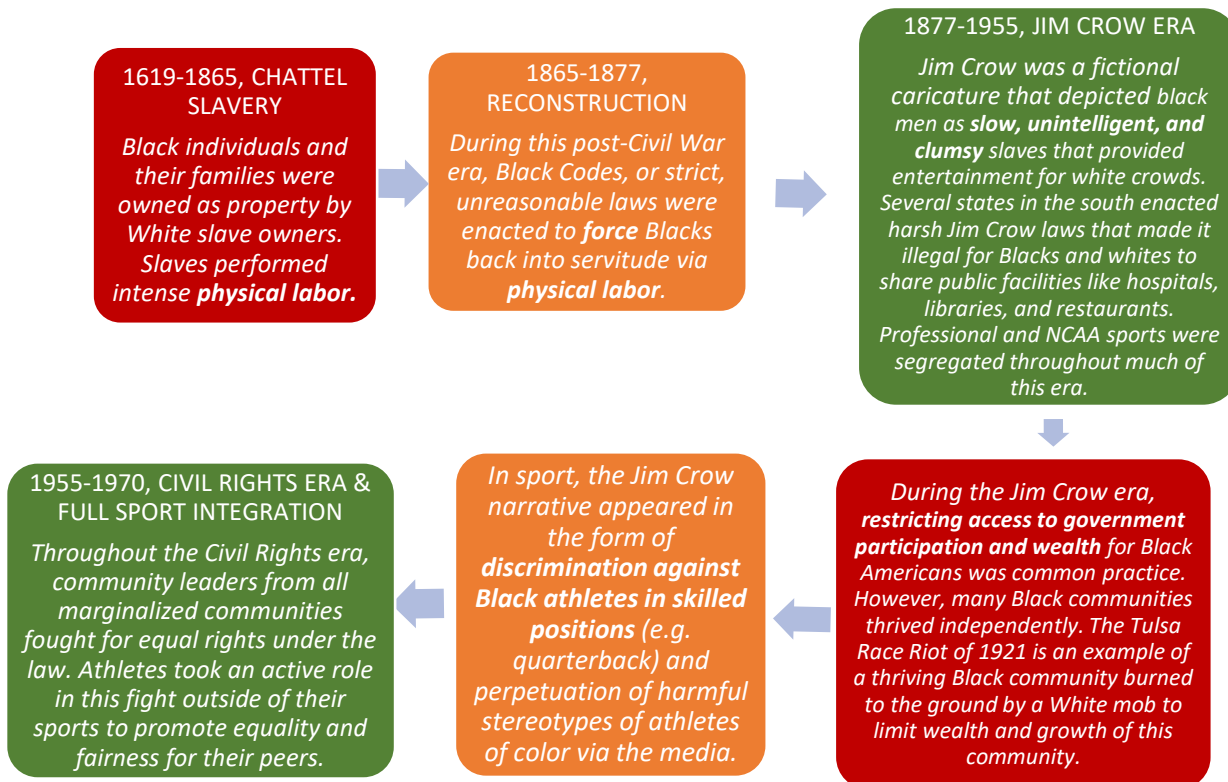




## “Shut up and Dribble”: What It Really Means and Why It’s Harmful To Athletes

As part of an ESPN interview in February of 2018, basketball superstar LeBron James was asked what it was like to be a Black public figure in America. He expressed concern over the political climate at the time, given that his home had recently been vandalized with racist graffiti. In response to this interview, a news reporter claimed that his comments were “barely intelligible”, “ungrammatical”, and that he gets paid “\$100 million a year to bounce a ball.” She ended her statement by saying James should “**shut up and dribble.**”

This kind of language promotes harmful stereotypes of athletes of color (Parham, 2016; Sailes, 2017; Stone, Perry, & Darely, 1997). For Black athletes, the rhetoric is deeply rooted in historical inequities and injustice that framed Black people as unintelligent and unworthy of wealth or affluence (Wiggins, 1997). Comments like those made about LeBron can be traced back to the narrative set forth in during slavery and the Jim Crow era, the latter of which being a critical time in the integration of professional and college sports. Here are a few examples that provide context for this path:



“Shut up and dribble” essentially reduces an athlete to their skill, or the labor they perform for entertainment. It minimizes the athlete in a way that detracts from and renders their contributions to society as less than those who are not athletes or minorities. It proposes that athletes of color do not contribute meaningfully to their surroundings. In the case of professional athletes, it suggests that they are paid to entertain only and not engage with their communities. Overall, these stereotypes and microaggressions are harmful to athlete identity development.

## The Impact of Microaggressions on Identity Development

**Systemic racism**, or a system of assigning value and allocating opportunity based on skin color (Jones, 2000), is still present in a number of areas of sport. As a result, **microaggressions**, or slights, snubs, or insults which communicate negative messages to people based on a marginalized status (Sue, 2010), are commonly encountered from coach to athlete, athlete to athlete, or from fan to athlete. “Shut up and dribble” is an example of a microaggression. Other examples include making assumptions about talent versus work ethic for an athlete of color, assuming that athletes of color are “dumb jocks”, treating athletes of color variably based on their performance, making stereotypical comments about country or ethnicity of origin and athletic skill, or assigning athletes to events or sports based on high school and college sport statistics (Billings, 2003; Czopp, 2010; Sailes, 2017). Coaches and parents need to be mindful of acting on bias against athletes of color regarding skills positions, like quarterback, setter (volleyball), pitcher, point guard or place kicker or areas of sport that have historically been predominantly White in America, such as distance running, swimming, equestrian, fencing, lacrosse, and field hockey. Microaggressions towards athletes are often unintentional. The next section provides helpful ways to increase self-awareness about racial microaggressions and how to combat them.

## What Can I Do?

**Ways you can work toward helping overcome racism and microaggressions toward minority athletes:**



### Systemic Level

- ⇒ Contact the National College Players Association ([info@ncpanow.org](mailto:info@ncpanow.org)) and see how you can get involved in advocating for college athletes in many ways, especially many that have a major impact on minority athletes
- ⇒ Create positive youth programs that can take place after school or during breaks or summers that foster positive development, empathy toward those who are different from you, etc. at a young, impressionable age
- ⇒ Establish positive role models within a respective minority population
- ⇒ Provide resources to sport psychology consultants and mental health providers
- ⇒ Create positive youth programs to incorporate life lessons, positive growth, and a growth mindset into athletics

### Personal Level

- ⇒ Facilitate conversations that can help lead to knowledge, understanding, empathy, etc. that can help decrease misunderstandings, misconceptions, and microaggressions
- ⇒ Provide social support to someone you have witnessed experiencing a microaggression or racism. Encourage them to seek support from others close to them.
- ⇒ Establish groups that can educate people on microaggressions, their effects, and how they can happen blindly or intentionally. Also, foster groups that can help individuals talk about their experiences and feel heard and safe.

## Where can I learn more about Athlete Activism?

--“Shut Up and Dribble,” (2018). Showtime Documentary.

--Facing the Divide: Psychology’s Conversation on Race and Health <https://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/diversity/index>

--Appreciative Advising: Six Phases to Mitigate Stereotype Threat Among Student Athletes: <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/jae/article/download/1223/883>

*This fact sheet is an initiative of the American Psychological Association Division 47’s Cornerstone Committee and has been prepared by Keri Kirk, Ph.D. (Postdoctoral Fellow, Atlanta VAMC); Christina Mayfield, M.S., Clinical Psychology Doctoral Student, Mercer University College of Health Professions; and Andy Walsh, M.S., M.A., Counseling Psychology Doctoral Student, University of North Texas. Faculty advisors include Dr. Laura Hayden, University of Massachusetts Boston and Dr. Kimberlee Bethany Bonura, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Walden University.*