Dear Student-Athlete: Illuminating the Voices of Former Female Student-Athletes of Color

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According to the Racial and Gender Report Card, in 2017-2018, nearly 30% of all female student-athletes across NCAA Divisions I, II, and III were student-athletes of color (Lapchick, 2019). This is noteworthy because race and gender are salient diversity matters in the world of college sport, and racism and sexism in particular continue to permeate this space (Brooks & Althouse, in press; Fink, 2016). While scholars have examined the lived experiences of Black male college athletes (Cooper, 2019; Hawkins, 2010; Singer, 2019; Smith, 2013) and some work has addressed the role of gender at play for White female student-athletes in particular (Blum, 1994; Johnson, Power, & Dick, 1999; Powe-Allred & Powe, 1997; Walker and Melton, 2015) not enough attention has been given to female student-athletes of color.

Since sport management scholar, Jennifer Bruening (2005) called for the need to make Black females more visible and central to sport studies, some scholars have focused their work on the lived experiences of this important student population at historically white college and universities (HWCU) in the United States (US). For example, Akilah Carter-Francique (2013) has built on Bruening’s scholarship (Bruening, 2005; Breuning, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005) and some of the earlier work of scholars such as Yevonne Smith, Doris Corbett, and Tina Sloan Green to examine the lived experiences of Black female athletes. Despite this, there is still a dearth of research with Black female athletes, but even less with other racial minority female athletes at HWCUs in the US.

We draw from critical race feminism (CRF) (Wing, 2003) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as complimentary epistemological frameworks and theoretical tools that can be used to better understand racialized and gendered experiences of women of color by privileging their voices in the research process. Moreover, this study seeks to begin filling the aforementioned gap by focusing on Black female athletes and particularly their less talked about racial minority peers (i.e., Asian/Pacific Islander, Latina, Native American) who participated in college sport at HWCUs.

In line with this call from sport management scholars to embrace contemporary and creative qualitative approaches to research in the field (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016; Hoeber & Shaw, 2017; Rinehart, 2005), this study will triangulate three forms of data collection techniques: (a) Background questionnaire, (b) Oral history, and (c) Written narrative to centralize the voices and perspectives of these historically marginalized groups. A general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) will be used to analyze the data derived from this study as we strive to unpack the core meanings emerging from the individual cases of the twenty female athletes of color who participate in this study.

We will discuss the findings from our study with these former female student-athletes of color, and illuminate both the theoretical and practical implications this work has for the field of sport management.