

## “Breaking the mould”: Resisting the stereotypes of being a Black Canadian student-athlete

### « Sortir du moule » : résister aux stéréotypes d'être un étudiant-athlète canadien noir

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#### Article abstract

This article examines how stereotypes operate in the social construction of Black Canadian male student-athletes and how those stereotypes frame these students' lived experiences in relation to race, athletic ability, and academic performance. From qualitative interviews with twenty current and former Black Canadian student-athletes, we found that they largely resisted and challenged the stereotypes of being primarily athletes and less students. In various ways, they sought to demonstrate that they possessed the skills needed to be academically successful students with the ability to balance their athletic and academic responsibilities and commitments. This was evident in their having obtained the required grades to enter university, receiving athletic scholarships, maintaining playing eligibility, graduating from university, and going on to pursue graduate studies.



# “BREAKING THE MOULD”: RESISTING THE STEREOTYPES OF BEING A BLACK CANADIAN STUDENT-ATHLETE

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines how stereotypes operate in the social construction of Black Canadian male student-athletes and how those stereotypes frame these students' lived experiences in relation to race, athletic ability, and academic performance. From qualitative interviews with twenty current and former Black Canadian student-athletes, we found that they largely resisted and challenged the stereotypes of being primarily athletes and less students. In various ways, they sought to demonstrate that they possessed the skills needed to be academically successful students with the ability to balance their athletic and academic responsibilities and commitments. This was evident in their having obtained the required grades to enter university, receiving athletic scholarships, maintaining playing eligibility, graduating from university, and going on to pursue graduate studies.

«SORTIR DU MOULE» : RÉSISTER AUX STÉRÉOTYPES D'ÊTRE UN ÉTUDIANT-ATHLÈTE CANADIEN NOIR

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article examine comment les stéréotypes opèrent dans la construction sociale des étudiants-athlètes masculins noirs canadiens et comment ces stéréotypes encadrent les expériences vécues de ces étudiants en relation de leur race, leur athlétisme et leur performance scolaire. À partir d'entrevues avec vingt étudiants-athlètes noirs canadiens actuels et anciens, nous avons constaté qu'ils défiaient les stéréotypes d'être plus athlètes qu'étudiants. De diverses manières, ils ont cherché à démontrer qu'ils possédaient les compétences nécessaires pour réussir sur le plan scolaire avec la capacité d'équilibrer leurs engagements sportifs et académiques. Cela était évident vu qu'ils avaient obtenu les notes requises par les universités, reçu des bourses d'études, maintenu leurs admissibilités au sport, obtenu leurs diplômes universitaires et ont pu poursuivre leurs études.

The prevailing stereotype of Black student-athletes is that they are athletes first and students second. This notion is often fueled by the belief that Black people are physically gifted, possessing genes that enable them to run faster and jump higher than other races, all without having to work as hard to achieve such performances (Edwards, 2000; Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2011). Despite evidence to the contrary, this myth of Black genetic advantage has sustained assumptions about Black athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority that are proving difficult to dispel (Coakley, 2006; Graves, 2004). This use of stereotypes, comprised of knowledge and assumptions about certain attributes and behaviours, is an oversimplification of a complex social reality. It is a process known as social formation or stereotype formation, which is the perspectives and impressions people create about social groups (Hinton, 2019). This article explores the impact that race-based stereotyping has on the university experiences of Black Canadian male student-athletes and, in turn, on their academic performance and educational outcomes. We acknowledge the heterogeneity of the Black population, but for ease and simplicity, this article uses the term *Black*<sup>1</sup> to refer to Black Canadians, regardless of their African or Caribbean heritage. We also note the differences in practices and outcomes in Canadian and American contexts.

The literature on the university experiences of student-athletes – especially males – tells of how stereotypes operate to position them as athletes more than as students (James 2010, 2021). Our focus here is on how Black Canadian university student-athletes navigate, negotiate, and act against the stereotypes that teachers, coaches, peers, the media, and even parents wittingly and unwittingly re-enforce about the value and viability of athletic ambitions, this at the expense of the students' academic interests. This is particularly worrisome and problematic for Black Canadian student-athletes since the Canadian educational system does not value and support student-athletics in the same way as in the United States. In the Canadian university sport system – formerly known as Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), and now referred to as University Sports (U SPORTS) – access, quality, and funding differ from the situation in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) of the United States of America (Geiger, 2013). And, despite valiant efforts to address this situation and recognize the athletic skills and abilities of Black youth, athletic participation actually has the potential to limit their success since upward social mobility is primarily obtained through education, not athletics.

James (2010) suggests that pushing Black students into athletic endeavours at the expense of academic pursuits helps to perpetuate the stereotype that Black youth are supposed to excel athletically. This myth is informed by the success of Black Americans in sport along with the media images, ideas, and social practices that are used to construct Black youth as superior athletes and inferior students (Conyers, 2014). Many Black Canadian youth come to believe that sport

offers them the greatest educational, and hence career, opportunities that they might not otherwise attain. Exposure to these images, messages, and practices through television and other media sources entices these young people with the dream of attending American universities on sport scholarships where they will be recognized as accomplished athletes in the highly competitive arena of American intercollegiate sports, regardless of their accomplishments as students (Dyck, 2006; James, 2012). However, the odds of Canadian high school athletes receiving an NCAA athletic scholarship, or of Canadian university athletes entering the professional sport ranks, are exceedingly remote (Dyck, 2006). In accordance with the stereotype, some Black Canadian student-athletes continue to participate in athletics at a high level with the expectation that they will beat the odds. Other Black Canadian student-athletes understand and resist the stereotypes, thereby challenging the notion that their only means of achieving success and social mobility is through athletic competition.

Before discussing the findings of our study, we first present a brief literature review focussing primarily on what is said about Black student-athletes and the stereotypes pertaining to them. This is followed by a discussion of our conceptual framework, built on Critical Race Theory (CRT), which informed our analyses. In the findings that follow, we build on the themes that emerge from what we heard from participants.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW: STEREOTYPES OF THE BLACK CANADIAN MALE STUDENT-ATHLETE

Black Canadian culture is often imagined as a reproduction of Black American culture. As a consequence, representations in media often meld young Black Canadian identity with that of Black America (Joseph & Kuo, 2009; May, 2009). Walcott (2001) highlights this mindset by arguing that, in Canada, there is a tendency to categorize Black people into one group and ignore their ethnic differences. For instance, in the case of continental Africans, along with identifying with their ethnic group, they use other adjectives to describe themselves, such as religion and/or the region of the countries in which they lived prior to coming to North America (Ibrahim, 2004, p.78). The descriptor “Black” strips away the variations between the various Black communities, leaving them to be imagined, constructed, and grouped based solely on skin colour. It is this racialization of North American Black peoples as a homogenous group that invites a deeper examination of Blackness (Crenshaw, 2002). Both past and present circumstances of Black male students in North America are associated with a greater probability of failing to obtain desirable life outcomes. This is because, in addition to the youths themselves, these desirable life outcomes are also viewed as being at-risk through the behaviours and dispositions of the youths and their families (Kelly, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

The construction of Black athletic superiority in fact constitutes another, more subtle form of racism which masks the idea that Black people are intellectually inferior with a purportedly positive generalization (Winant, 2000). This stereotype has led some American educators to conclude that Black males are uninterested, and even unable, to learn and thus *only* capable of engaging in sport (Parsons, 2013). For their part, Canadian educators have encouraged Black students to take non-university path programs, believing that they either do not have the capacity for university education or that their best opportunity for social mobility resides in college education or athletics rather than in the formal educational setting of university (James, 2021). Moreover, when Black students display academic potential by taking their education seriously, it gives the impression that they are different from their Black peers – something white teachers might find especially appealing in constructing those Black students as the exception rather than the rule (James, 2010).

Although it is argued that a lack of experience with the Eurocentric curriculum is the leading cause of the academic struggles of African-Canadians (Codjoe, 2006), Thiessen (2009) asserts that the Eurocentric curriculum in the Canadian school system does not necessarily hinder Black educational success, evidenced by the academic efforts and successes of Black immigrant students compared to their Black peers – many of whom are third-plus generation Canadians. However, those who claim that it is not the educational system that is failing to be responsive to the needs and interests of Black students often attribute poor educational outcomes of third-plus generation students to laziness and disinterest in school, rather than recognizing the Eurocentric bias of the school curriculum and the fact that Black students are more likely to benefit from a school curriculum that is relevant to them (James 2021).

Emerging from the relationship between stereotypes of athletic pursuit and of academic achievement is the “dumb jock” stereotype which suggests that those with greater athletic ability have less intellectual ability (Harrison et al., 2011; Wininger & White, 2015). Jameson et al. (2007) found that an athlete’s intellectual performance is likely to be negatively affected by this stereotype, particularly if the stereotype further implies that they have been given preferential treatment during the American college admission process. In the Canadian university sport system, there is little evidence to suggest that preferential treatment exists for Canadian student-athletes to the same degree as it exists for American student-athletes (Miller & Kerr, 2002). According to its policies and procedures, U SPORTS promotes education along with athletics. As such, there is the expectation that entry into a Canadian university is strictly based on merit, which is illustrated through the need to earn the requisite grades to warrant acceptance into a post-secondary institution, regardless of athletic potential. This expectation is emphasized by the fact that student-athletes are eligible to receive an athletic scholarship at the beginning of the school year

(September) only if they enter university with at least an 80% (B average<sup>2</sup>) high school average (U SPORTS, 2018).

In fact, in Ontario, student-athletes are eligible to receive an athletic scholarship each year if they receive at least a 70% (C average) university average the previous school year. Moreover, those student-athletes in Canada attending universities outside of Ontario are eligible to receive scholarships at the beginning of the school year if they achieve a minimum of 65% (C- average) university average the previous school year (U SPORTS, 2018).

Although the “dumb jock” stereotype is often used to refer to student-athletes generally, there is also a racialization aspect particular to stereotypes of Black student-athletes. This racialization is premised on the idea that they – in this case Black young men – are naturally more athletic than white men due to Western society’s increased focus on the physicality of the Black body. Depictions of the Black athlete as possessing genetic advantages, aggressive prowess, increased physical power, and hypersexuality reinforce the stereotype of the superior Black athlete (Coakley, 2006; Graves, 2004), one who is incapable of achieving success outside of the athletic domain (Conyers, 2014).

### *Conceptual framework*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used to inform the analysis of stereotypes employed in this study. In this framing, race is understood as a central component in one’s identification, but it operates in relation to other identity factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and immigrant status (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). At the same time, racism, which is inherent in society, is recognized as intersecting with other forms of subordination and oppression, such as sexism and classism, that undermine the well-being of racialized people (Gillborn, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT also challenges dominant ideologies and conventions associated with whiteness that work to foster inequities (Huber, 2008; Nebeker, 1998). Moreover, the theory describes how dominant ideologies inform claims of objectivity, meritocracy, colour-blindness, and equal opportunity that, in practice, serve to maintain social, educational, and athletic systems of racialization and racism that disenfranchise Black students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). It is through these systems that stereotypes of Black students having genetic advantages in athletics are sustained and the students’ lack of academic success is attributed to inherent physical abilities and skills. Hence, preferential treatment is given to Black youth in the area of athletics.

Within the framework of CRT, the voices of marginalized people are understood to be central to any messaging about them (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Delgado (1989) argues that disadvantaged individuals need to have their voices heard. In this regard, counter-storytelling is an important and essential tool in CRT because of its emphasis on the unspoken voice which often contradicts the same stories told by white people or other majority group members (Hylton, 2005).

Thus, engaging in direct dialogue with Black students about their experiences with racism is a useful and appropriate way to make sense of their racialized experiences (James, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2011), particularly when those experiences are influenced by stereotypes.

## METHODOLOGY

This article focuses on the stereotypes that impacted the educational and athletic trajectory of student-athletes who had attended, as well as those attending, Canadian universities. It is based on research from a larger project on the university experiences of Black Canadian student-athletes. Questions pertaining to race were not initially introduced into the interviews. It was purposely left to participants to introduce race on their own and, if they did not, the topic was introduced toward the end of interview. For the most part, with no prompting, participants did mention the ways in which race was operating in their educational and athletic experiences, both in high school and university. A common reference was to how the “dumb jock” stereotype influenced their experiences as a Black student-athlete.

The student-athletes interviewed for this study were basketball, gridiron football, track-and-field, and soccer athletes. Initially, the idea was only to interview gridiron football, basketball, and track-and-field athletes because the athletes of those sports were thought to be the most valued by Black youth (Sheldon et al., 2007; Spaaij et al., 2015). However, during the recruitment process, other student-athletes expressed interest in participating, so the criteria were amended to include soccer players. Additionally, participants needed to have completed high school in Canada so that any experiences of racialization and marginalization would be within the Canadian educational context. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method and needed to be no more than two years removed from university sport competition or, for those currently in university, two years away from graduating. This criterion was employed to ensure that those who had already graduated could recall past events, and those who were yet to graduate had been in university for a significant amount of time.

Twenty Black student-athletes aged 20 to 26 years old participated in this study; 12 of the 20 were still in university at the time of the interviews. All participants attended a post-secondary institution in Ontario except one student who attended university in Alberta. All the participants were recruited through university websites, Facebook, and by referrals from other participants, athletes, and/or their friends. By relying on the universities’ athletic web pages, the photographs of players’ faces, whose skin colour<sup>3</sup> signaled that they might be Black, became a recruitment tool. The web pages also provided players’ names, the sport in which they participated, their year of playing eligibility, and their program of study. The pseudonyms used in this study were chosen by each participant.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the participants in the study, organized by university attended, sport played, place of birth, age, and whether the participants were in university or out of university at the time of the interview.

**TABLE 1. Student-athlete demographic breakdown**

	U of O	UW	Carleton	WLU	McMaster	UWO	York	U of T	MacEwen	Queen's	Totals
<b>Sport</b>											
(Grid-iron) Football	1		2	2			1	1		1	8
Basketball	1	2			2						5
Track and Field	4										4
Soccer		1				1			1		3
<b>Place of Birth</b>											
Canada	3	3	2	2	2	1	1		1	1	16
Nigeria	1							1			2
Congo	1										1
Senegal	1										1
<b>Ages</b>											
20		1									1
21	2				1				1		4
22			1	2	1			1		1	6
23	1										1
24	2	1	1				1				5
25	1					1					2
26		1									1
In University	3	2	2	2	2				1		12
Out of University	3	1				1	1	1		1	8

**NOTE.** U of O = University of Ottawa; UW = University of Waterloo; Carleton = Carleton University; WLU = Wilfred Laurier University; McMaster = McMaster University; UWO = University of Western Ontario; York = York University; U of T = University of Toronto; MacEwen = MacEwen University; Queen's = Queen's University.



Table 2 provides a more detailed description of each participant, broken down by ethnicity and race of participants' parents, the sport that the participants played, participants' ages, their university program, how long they had been in or out of university, their place of birth, and their parents' place of origin.

**TABLE 2.** *List of participants at time of interview*

Participant	Sport	Age	Program (ordered by most recent)	U SPORTS Eligibility	Participant's Birthplace	Parents' Origin
Nicholas (Black mother, Black father)	Track and Field	25	Sport Management (graduate) Education (undergraduate) Human Kinetics (undergraduate)	1 year out	Canada	Haiti
Denzel (Black mother, Black father)	Track and Field	24	Social Sciences	1 year out	Canada	Trinidad (mother) Jamaica (father)
Flash (white mother, Black father)	Soccer	25	Law (professional degree) Political Science (undergraduate)	2 years out	Canada	Canada
Fred (Black mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	22	Kinesiology (graduate) Kinesiology (undergraduate)	1 year out	Nigeria	Nigeria
Victor (Black mother, Black father)	Basketball	26	Political Science (undergraduate)	1 year out	Canada	Jamaica
John (Black mother, Black father)	Basketball	22	Economics (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Grenada
Kenny (Black mother, Black father)	Track and Field	21	Criminology (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Congo
Carter (Black mother, Black father)	Basketball	21	Economics (undergraduate)	5th year	Nigeria	Nigeria

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Mike (Black mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	22	Computing (undergraduate)	1 year out	Canada	Canada (mother) Nigeria (father)
Bob (Black mother, Black father)	Track and Field	23	Psychology (undergraduate)	1 year out	Congo	Congo
William (Black mother, Black father)	Basketball	24	English (undergraduate)	5th year	Canada	Jamaica
Riley (Black mother, Black father)	Soccer	20	Accounting & Finance (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Ghana
Yusuf (Black mother, Black father)	Soccer	21	Criminology (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Congo
Kevin (Black mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	24	Psychology (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Canada (mother) USA (father)
Jamal (Middle Eastern mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	22	Communications (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Israel (mother) Jamaica (father)
Gordon (Black mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	24	Sociology (undergraduate)	1 year out	Canada	Jamaica
James (Black mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	24	History (undergraduate)	3rd year	Senegal	Senegal
Mark (Black mother, white father)	Basketball	21	Kinesiology (undergraduate)	3rd year	Canada	Jamaica (mother) Canada (father)

Jay (Black mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	22	Environmental Studies (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Canada (mother) USA (father)
Frank (Black mother, Black father)	Football (Gridiron)	22	Communications (undergraduate)	4th year	Canada	Congo

Interviews were conducted in a place preferred by the participant, typically in a quiet area such as a library, university office, or other university meeting room. In some cases, the interviews were by telephone. The average length of each interview was 2 hours, with the shortest interview being about 1:15 minutes and the longest being about 2:30 minutes. The interviewer sought to interview the participants for at least 1 hour with no maximum time limit set. The idea was, as much as possible, to engage the participants in conversation in order to obtain as much information from them as they were willing to share on the subject of the research. Some participants were more talkative than others, allowing for longer, more free-flowing conversations, while those who were more reserved produced shorter interviews and necessitated more probing questions. In analyzing the interviews, a strong emphasis was placed on understanding the participants' experiences, which made the process of creating themes and linking the interviews to broader concepts easier. Furthermore, the clustering of participants' responses to the questions helped with the identification of themes and pointed to a similarity of ideas presented by the participants.

In what follows, we discuss the findings, which are organized by those themes that emerged from the participants' narratives about their sense of identity as Black student-athletes playing sport while in university, how they responded when confronted with stereotypes, and their efforts to assert their academic acuity. The narratives indicate that while similarities do exist among the participants, there are also differences that help to shape their unique sense of self and how they interpret their academic and university sport trajectories. All names of the student-athletes are pseudonyms.

Further, our insights into these findings are informed by our lived experiences as well as our work with student-athletes. Nartey's understanding of, and insights into, the student-athlete experience was informed by his status as a former university student-athlete, doctoral candidate at the time, and an African-born Black male in his 30s. These experiences likely aided in the recruitment of participants and the development of trust; the resulting insider perspective not only helped to influence the types of questions asked during the interviews, but also the issues explored (Nartey, 2019). James, a Black researcher, has been conducting research in this area for more than twenty years. Our joint experiences combined to furnish the insights that we present in this article.

## FINDINGS: BEING BLACK STUDENT-ATHLETES IN UNIVERSITY

### *What does it mean to be Black?*

The dual roles of student and athlete were cherished by the participants in this study because, for them, these ascriptions together represented a level of exclusivity that stemmed from having to obtain the necessary high school averages for university admission, achieving a minimum average to be allowed to compete in athletics, maintaining full-time academic status, and honing their athletic skills to earn playing time. As one participant explained:

It's more exclusive. Like I feel it's something that is a step above because everybody who's at the school is in a program but not everybody who's at the school is in athletics or not everybody who's at the school is in a club. So, it's a way of distinguishing yourself amongst other people. (Victor)

Being a student-athlete in an environment where everyone was just a student added an element of uniqueness to their scholastic experience. All the participants in this study felt that they were members of a select group which set them apart from the rest of the university population (Sefa Dei & James, 1998). They perceived their engagement in university athletics – in the dual role of athlete and student – as helping them to resist the perceived homogeneity that existed of Black students. Thus, their engagement in activities that highlighted their individuality and unique talents was something that they very much relished as it set them apart from the singular image of Black students and illustrated the heterogeneity of Blackness (see also Martis 2020).

### *“I would never hold back my Blackness ...”*

The participants also discussed having to engage in behaviours deemed appropriate for Black males as a way of maintaining their Blackness. Jamal, who was being scouted for the CFL draft at the time of the interview, took particular pride in engaging in stereotypical Black behaviours:

If I walk into class and I see one of my boys, I'm not going to stop myself from saying, “What up nigga, how you doin'?” If I do that and there's a white teacher beside me that's shocked and opens her mouth agape, that makes me smile even more. Because she's going to see my paper and mark it a 90% and think “I guess I shouldn't have judged that guy and anybody else that acts a certain way.” Like, on my team, there are a lot of guys from Toronto, from Jane and Finch and I have zero issue with them sagging their pants or doing whatever they want because they're in university. So, I would never hold back my Blackness in any case. The way I want to speak, the way I want to hold myself and behave, and the music I want to listen to, and how loudly, is never going to be impacted by who I am around.

Jamal's brash in-your-face attitude supports the findings of Sefa Dei and James (1998) which suggests that Black students use Blackness as a strategy to challenge the dominant conceptions of identity. Jamal's defiance, as a mixed-raced individual, suggests his acknowledgement of living in a world of racialized identity in which

his actions and attitudes were framed for him to become Black (see Martis, 2020; Sefa Dei, 2018). In this case, he seemed to have been overcompensating for his mixed-raced heritage by engaging in behaviours that some individuals deemed to be inappropriate – or stereotypical.

In addition, Jamal's comments support the old adage of "Don't judge a book by its cover." In other words, his comment points to the pride he felt with having teammates and fellow Black students from the marginalized community of Jane and Finch (Friesen, 2018); for despite fewer resources, they achieved the same academic credentials for university admission as their white counterparts. Their enrollment in university challenged the narrative that Black youth are underachievers, and hence their Blackness was not something about which they should feel ashamed. Specifically, Jamal's attitude and behaviour towards his teacher was not only to dispel doubt about his Blackness and related culture, but exemplify his resistance to the categorization of an inferior Black male. As such, he expected that once others interacted with him on an individual level, they would come to see the error of their ways and appreciate his true abilities and character.

This grappling with issues of identity was not only evident among mixed-raced participants. Fred, who was born in Nigeria, and was enrolled in a master's of science in kinesiology program at the time of the interview, indicated that while he might outwardly show support for rap music, inwardly he did not feel connected to the music. He too indicated that his stereotypical behaviours were meant to reassure his Black peers of his Blackness:

Sometimes, I feel like I have to be better than I am because otherwise you get put into a category. For example, in the locker room, I listen to rap music. But there are certain kinds of rap music that I think are just dumb. But in the locker room you see all the Black dudes and they listen to rap music. So, you kind of have to join that culture in a sense, even if you don't see yourself in it because it makes you more Black.

So, in order to ensure that his Blackness was not questioned, Fred engaged in behaviours that he described as making him "more Black," while also making every effort to demonstrate that he did not fit the stereotype of an academically underperforming Black student – after all, he was "better" for being a graduate student. But what comes through in Fred's statement is that, while he was doing well academically, he did not betray his fellow Black peers by acting white (Ogbu, 2004). His involvement in sport coincides with Durkee et al.'s (2019) suggestion that some Black youth purposely use their participation in sport, particularly basketball or football, as a means of accentuating their Blackness, while at the same time mitigating accusations of acting white. Hence, labels of "sell-out" and the fear of labels contribute to the pressure that many Black student-athletes place on themselves to avoid stereotypes.

Fred’s decision to adopt Black cultural practices and conform to the stereotypes and ascribed group norms eliminated questions about his Blackness. His actions, as a result of this decision, were done to appease his peers, solidify his Black identity, and engage in behaviours associated with what a Black male is supposed to be, thereby allowing himself to be seen as a stereotypical Black male. However, Fred’s desire to be better raises the question of whether his intellectual ability, demonstrated by the fact that he was a graduate student, was enough to ensure that he was not defined by whatever stereotypical Black behaviours he might engage in. Yet, he seemed disappointed in himself for not resisting the perpetuation of Black stereotypes as his account hints at an apology for simply being Black. This is not uncommon. Despite the image that they present to the world, many Black males who value their Blackness construct a large portion of their identity based on how others perceive their Blackness. Thus, while Fred’s feigned affinity for rap music may have perpetuated Black stereotypes, it was also seemingly necessary to reaffirm his sense of Blackness.

*“You talk white”*

In contrast to Jamal and Fred who might be seen to be perpetuating stereotypes, Flash, who was also of mixed-raced heritage and a student in a faculty of law program, actively resisted Black stereotypes – even though doing so led to increased ridicule and questions about his Black identity. Nevertheless, in discussing his sense of identity, he sought to counter the narrative of Black people as intellectually inferior, believing that such a stereotype degrades Black people while simultaneously uplifting white people:

It wasn’t that rare for people to say that I spoke white. So, when I got to [name of university] and people were saying the same kind of jokes, “Oreo,” “You talk white,” because I didn’t talk like “yo yo yo,” etc. It bothered me since being more articulate is to be more white.

Flash acknowledged that his rich vocabulary invited taunts of “Oreo,” implying that he was Black on the outside and white on the inside. Such taunts directed at him were not merely because of his mixed-race heritage, but also because his expressions – evident in his language and program of study – were perceived to be characteristic of whiteness. Despite challenging the stereotypes, Flash’s efforts seemed not to be enough for him to avoid questions of identity.

Even though the Canadian university sport system emphasizes that its student-athletes maintain a balance between athletic and academic success, the myth of the intellectually inferior Black student-athlete remains (James, 2012; see also Harrison et al., 2011). As Flash recalled, Black students thought he was too white because of his academic success and penchant for speaking with strict grammar, while white students viewed him as definitely Black because of his skin colour and athletic prowess. Caught between being defined by his intellectual ability as white and his athleticism as Black, Flash’s efforts to excel academically meant that he was unable to garner the social, cultural, and educational peer

support that he sought during his university career. It is possible that had Flash not been of mixed-race background, he may not have felt the same pressure to excel athletically and academically because there would be fewer questions and subsequently fewer accusations regarding his identity.

Similarly, when asked about the impact that his Blackness had on his academic achievement, Fred had this to say:

It's not your skin tone, it's your personality, behaviour, and just the way you act in general, in different situations. The way you talk, your intelligence level. Honestly, if you are too smart, I feel like it reduces your level of Blackness – which is actually just ridiculous! It's how people see it though.

In an article entitled “Beyond Test Performance: A Broader View of Stereotype Threat,” Lewis and Sekaquaptewa (2016), building on Steele and Aronson’s (1995) work on stereotype threat, found that African-Americans are likely to perform negatively on intellectual tests because of the pressure to challenge cultural stereotypes that question their intellectual and academic abilities. Fred’s comment indicates that a similar stereotype threat exists in Canada as well. According to Fred, projecting a level of intelligence that does not coincide with the stereotypical standard of Blackness seemingly reduces a person’s Blackness. This is a mindset that many Black and non-Black individuals possess which greatly influences how Black youth navigate the educational system in Canada. As a result, many Black youth resort to athletics as validation of their self-worth (Saul & James, 2006), increasing the likelihood of others seeing Black people in athletics. This in turn serves as motivation for more Black youth to excel in this endeavour, to the detriment of their academic success. However, Fred’s presence in a master’s program meant that he rejected the stereotype threat, demonstrating a strong, yet isolating, act of resistance.

*“Everything is easier when you have people who look like you”*

William, a basketball player in his final year of undergraduate studies during his interview, lamented the absence of Black role models who had achieved success outside of sport:

What you see is us dancing on BET<sup>4</sup> or whatever. You’re not seeing the doctors, you’re not hearing about our history or all that good stuff. You only see the bad stuff. So even if there were a good amount of Black people that were doctors, everything is easier when you have people that look like you and remind you of yourself. And whether it’s their race or character traits or whatever, there’s just not enough people to look up to. But it’s nice when you see Black doctors. It’s more inspiring than seeing any other race do it so.

William’s assertion likely stems from the fact that BET (Black Entertainment Television) creates an image that Black people are mainly entertainers, and the lack of visible Black role models outside of the entertainment industry likely pushes many Black Canadian youth into thinking that their only, or main, avenue toward upward social mobility is through the sport and entertainment industry.

This thinking is consistent with the views expressed by other participants in this study as well as with authors such as Carrington (1998), Hodge et al. (2008), Martis (2020), and Wilson and Sparks (1999) who have all stressed the importance of Black role models. They all maintain that the invisibility of successful Black people in careers outside of sport and entertainment makes it harder for some Black youth to strive towards careers outside of these fields.

According to William, a Jamaican-Canadian, the lack of relatable role models creates lowered expectations regarding upward social mobility for Black youth since they are regularly bombarded with images of successful Black entertainers—particularly athletes (Harrison et al., 2004, 2011). This not only makes them unaware that they can have successful careers outside of the sporting or entertainment industry, but they come to believe that careers outside of the sport industry are unsuitable. Hence, there is a need for young people, including these student-athletes, to see Black people in professional positions such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, and professors so that when their athletic careers end, they too will have the necessary role models to inspire their continuing education.

Whereas William sought Black role models, Nicholas described the responsibility he himself felt to be a good Black role model for the next generation of Black youth. Coming from a low socio-economic background and growing up in a neighbourhood where he was often exposed to criminal activities, Nicholas, a former track-and-field athlete, rejected the assumption that Black people cannot achieve combined athletic and academic successes:

At the high school I went to, a lot of the Black student-athletes didn't end up going to university or college or anything. But I feel it's like because I was a Black student-athlete, it's like you know what? Let's make this look really good. Let me be the poster boy for all Black student-athletes. It gave me more of a drive to work harder and succeed better. It just gave me a drive. There was a time when I didn't think I was going to make it in school. I used to think that I was like a gangbanger and stuff. But look at me now. I'm a teacher. I'm a master's candidate. I did it.

The lack of visible Black role models outside of sport motivated Nicholas to become the “poster boy” for overcoming adversity. As such, he saw himself as a role model for young Black students. For him, it was simply not enough to seek the change he wanted to see in the world; he actively strove to be the change that he sought. His experiences as a Black student-athlete and graduate student in a sport management master's program was evidence enough for him to know that Black youth do not have to be limited to careers in sport or entertainment.

*“I just want to show the Black professor [and parents] that there are Black academics”*

The pursuit of careers in sport or entertainment was challenged by many of the parents of these Black youth. As such, parental support was a crucial component that aided many of these student-athletes to resist the stereotypes associated with being a Black Canadian student-athlete. Participants from both single and two-



parent households had parents who encouraged them to succeed academically. However, the process by which academic success was encouraged varied for both children of immigrant parents and children of non-immigrant parents. As a second-generation Canadian and a child of Congolese parents, Frank was told by his parents that he could be as Canadian as he wanted outside their home, but inside their home, he was a Congolese and parental rules and cultural heritage took precedence. Hence, in keeping with the immigrant aspirations for their children (James, 2021), Frank was strongly encouraged by his parents to pursue academic work at the expense of his athletic endeavours. To this end, his parents prioritized education and stressed the importance of taking advantage of the opportunities presented to him in Canada. According to Frank:

For me it was, in a sense, knowing that my dad has two master's degrees and a PhD. So, he's always stressed the importance of school and making sure you can get the best education that you can. They always tell us that since we are fortunate enough to be born here, we need to take advantage of all the resources that are given to us.

Frank's pursuit of athletics, while maintaining above-average grades as demanded by his parents, not only challenged the North American expectation that he would excel athletically at the expense of academic success, but also the immigrant expectation that he would excel academically at the expense of athletics. The pressure to appease both groups, with parents valuing academic excellence over athletic endeavours and peers valuing athletic performance over academic pursuits, was overwhelming. However, Frank's ability to maintain an athletic and academic balance as a means of challenging both of these narratives was something that he, and most of the participants, seemed to relish, hence their resistance to the pressures to succeed academically and athletically through conventional methods. This resistance illustrated their ability to break the mould of what seemed to be acceptable Black behavior.

Riley, on the other hand, was actively discouraged from participating in athletics. His parents showed their disregard for athletics by never attending any of his soccer matches. While Ghanaian soccer may be held in high esteem at the national level in Ghana, many Ghanaian parents in Canada firmly believe that education is the best avenue to success, hence their reason for immigrating to Canada. The underlying message in his culturally Ghanaian household was that athletics were a hindrance to academic success. As Riley recalled:

My parents never attended a single game. They've never seen me play a sport. In high school they've never seen me play. And university they never seen me play. "You want to play sports that's fine, but your academics don't drop, if anything they better go up."

Despite his parents not attending any of his games, Riley understood the sacrifices his parents made for him to obtain an education. As he further stated, his Ghanaian parents' refusal to attend his soccer matches worked to instill in

him the value of education. Whether they acknowledged it or not, some of the participants’ parents were the Black role models that they sought. In Riley’s case, his parents’ careers — both being Chartered Professional Accountants (CPA) — motivated him to pursue accounting as a profession, if only to make his parents proud. Riley’s pursuit of the CPA designation demonstrated the influence his parents’ education had on him. Furthermore, his parents’ position on sport participation supports the claim that Black immigrant parents actively discourage their children from engaging in athletics because they perceive sport to stand in the way of their children’s academic success and ultimately their professional career success (James, 2010).

When asked to discuss how his race may have impacted his academic performance, Jay, who has a Canadian mother and American father, stated that part of his motivation to succeed academically was because he felt a responsibility to work harder in the classroom to reject the stereotype of the academically inferior Black male. At the time of the interview, Jay was being scouted by the CFL but indicated that he would pursue a master’s degree upon completion of his undergraduate degree if he did not get drafted. Thus, his academic performance was important to him as he sought to achieve the necessary grades to not only maintain his athletic scholarship, but also to pursue graduate studies. Jay also stated that having a Black professor played a significant role in his academic pursuits:

I can’t think of any specific instances when being a Black student has helped me. I know that if I ever have a Black professor, I work harder in those classes. This will be my third time having a Black professor this semester, and I just feel like more is expected out of me. Not necessarily that more is expected out of me, I just want to show the Black professor that there are Black academics.

Jay’s comment indicates that he did not wish to subscribe to the thinking that less was expected of him even in classes with Black teachers and educators who shared his cultural background and were able to relate to his circumstances. Instead, he believed that he needed to work even harder when he was taught by a Black professor to show them that he was a good student (see James, 2010). In doing so, Jay felt that he would be providing hope to the professor in knowing that young Black intellectuals do exist. His desire to please his professor could be understood as an extension of pleasing his parents because he was proud to see people who looked like him in a position of authority. Thus, by accepting responsibility and placing the onus on themselves as ambitious young Black men who are able to achieve academic success, these youth are shattering the narrative of the intellectual inferiority of Black student-athletes in university classrooms.

#### **CONCLUSION: CONFORMING TO AND RESISTING STEREOTYPES**

In resisting the stereotypes that characterize Black Canadian student-athletes as primarily athletes and less students, these student-athletes demonstrated that they

possess the skills needed to be successful young men regardless of race. Failure to take advantage of the opportunities presented are often criticisms levied against racialized groups in the quest for equity. The ability of these Black student-athletes to balance their athletic and academic responsibilities – evidenced by their graduation from high school, admission to university, maintenance of playing eligibility, receiving athletic scholarships in most cases, and either graduating from university, preparing to graduate from university, or pursuing graduate studies at the time of the interviews – counters the myth associated with Black athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority, showing that it is possible to be both a successful athlete *and* a successful student (see Appendix A for indication of their achievements to date).

The athletic and academic success displayed by these participants is even more impressive when we consider that many of these student-athletes had parents who lacked experience within the Canadian educational system (15 participants had immigrant parents). Only one participant ever became academically ineligible, but at the time of his interview he had regained his playing eligibility and was on track to graduate within the year. As Black youth, it would have been easy to conform to stereotypes that emphasize athletic pursuits at the expense of academic endeavours, yet many of these youth actively resisted such stereotypes, demonstrating their ability to exercise agency, successfully navigate the Canadian educational system on their own, and take advantage of the opportunities presented to them in Canada despite their race. However, the successes of these Black Canadian male student-athletes, and Black Canadian young people in general, cannot, and should not, be attributed to any one characteristic. Instead, their achievements should be examined in relation to the intersection of social, cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors (Shizha, 2016). Social and educational success does not pertain to specific, individual characteristics, but rather to an amalgamation of a multitude of qualities that embody the whole person, a reality which is most critically exemplified by Black student-athletes in Canada.

## NOTES

1. Consistent with the use of uppercase first letters for the names of ethnic and cultural groups, we have capitalized “B” in “Black.” As Harris (1993) writes, echoing Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Blacks like Asians, Latinos and other ‘minorities,’ constitute a specific cultural group and as such, require denotation as a proper noun” (p. 1710). Similarly, Dumas (2016), who also capitalizes “Black,” writes that “Black is understood as a self-determined name of a racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships. Black is a synonym (however imperfect) of African American. ... White is not capitalized ... because it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship.” (pp. 12–13). And Laws (2020) writes that “at the Columbia Journalism Review,

we capitalize *Black*, and not *white*, when referring to groups in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms. For many people, *Black* reflects a shared sense of identity and community. *White* carries a different set of meanings; capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists.”

2. According to U SPORTS policy and procedures, they have classified an 80% average as equating to a letter grade of “B.” It is noteworthy that in the grading schemes of university social sciences classes within U SPORTS, an 80% equates to a letter grade of “A” (U SPORTS, 2018).
3. In this study, it is the case that skin colour was used to construct who was Black. It is possible that individuals might have identified as Black, but if their skin colour did not construct them as Black, it was unlikely that they would have been invited to participate in the study. Thus, all participants in the study not only identified as Black, but their skin colour also constructed them as Black.
4. “BET” stands for “Black Entertainment Television.” It is an American television cable and satellite channel that produces entertainment geared towards Black American audiences (<https://www.bet.com>).

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#### APPENDIX A: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Student-Athlete	Post-Interview Status
Nicholas	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Obtained a bachelor's degree in education. Obtained a master's degree in sport management. Works full time as a high school health and physical education teacher. Helps to coach track and field at the university level.
Denzel	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Works part time. Still running track and field.
Flash	Graduated from a faculty of law. Passed his bar exam and is now a lawyer.
Fred	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Obtained his master's degree.
Victor	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Works full time at an IT company. Continues to maintain his own business.
John	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Works full time. Considering going back to school in about a year if he is not happy with his job at that time.
Kenny	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Currently works part time while setting up his own business.
Carter	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Plays professional basketball in Europe.
Mike	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Started his own tech business. Also works as a fitness instructor and personal trainer.
Bob	Works full time while taking courses to complete his undergraduate degree.
William	Obtained a bachelor's degree.
Riley	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Obtained a master's degree. Pursuing a second master's degree. Passed his CPA exam.
Yusuf	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Works full time in law enforcement. Plans to do more schooling and hopefully pursue a master's degree in the future.
Kevin	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Working manual labour and playing club rugby.
Jamal	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Professional football player in the CFL.
Gordon	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Works as a substitute teacher with aspirations to play football in Europe.
James	Obtained a bachelor's degree.
Mark	Came back for a fifth year of undergraduate studies.
Jay	Obtained a bachelor's degree. Works part time while pursuing a graduate degree.
Frank	Came back for a fifth year of undergraduate studies.

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