

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF STUDENT-ATHLETES  
IN VISUAL MEDIA

by

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**Abstract**

As the media impacts our lives on a daily basis, it shapes our perceptions of the world and people around us. According to the thoughts of Marshall McLuhan, George Gerbner, and Neil Postman, media create meanings for society to apply to their cultural norms and stereotypes. Whether we cultivate meaning from media metaphors or the media forms themselves, we reflect the mediated messages in our perceptions of identities, including those of student-athletes. After rhetorically analyzing films, television shows, advertisements, and online media, it can be said that visual media portray student-athletes in ways that present tensions for how society should view them: heroic, inspirational, egocentric, and rebellious. In addition, there are certain tensions among the identities of student-athletes according to media rhetoric.

A Rhetorical Analysis of the Representation  
of Student-Athletes in Visual Media

The expansion of knowledge and information available to humans has broadened with our constant use of media. As a result, mass media have impacted the lives of everyone in some shape or form. Because of the close relationship between people and media, our understanding of the world around us has changed because of the truths that have been proposed by various forms of media. The effects of media have led us to concepts and theories such as “the medium is the message,” cultivation theory, and media metaphors. These ideas help explain the ways in which media create perceptions of the world and how people create meaning from media.

Society has understandings of certain identities of people in the world because of the way media portray them. Visual media specifically shape the representations of various identities in films, television shows, advertisements, and other broadcasts. Student-athletes in particular align to form an identity that has been represented in both positive and negative ways according to these various forms of visual media. As a result, media allow viewers to interact with media messages that vary by medium about student-athletes so that society cultivates meanings of this identity as both heroic or inspirational and also egocentric or rebellious through themes that reflect such characteristics through rhetoric. I have rhetorically analyzed the following films: *Rudy* (1993), *Coach Carter* (2005), and *We Are Marshall* (2006). I also watched and analyzed *Undefeated* (2011), a documentary. In addition to films, I looked at episodes of television programs including *Friday Night Lights* (2006) and ESPN’s *30 For 30* (2009, 2010) television film series. I examined advertisements from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) that promoted their organization

and student-athletes and examined TED Talks videos that share stories of former student-athletes themselves. Throughout each of these media sources, common themes emerged: winning and the desire for perfection, influence in the community, goals and expectations that come with pressure, growth and failure, the tension between athletics and academics, having or obtaining an ego, “bad boy” image or aggressive behavior, power stances and advantages of student-athletes, demographics, racial tensions that reflect athletic ability, religion of faith and sport, and gender roles. As I continue, I further discuss the relationship between media and perception, present summaries of each source I analyzed, and introduce each theme as it pertains to the rhetoric and content of each media.

### **Media Effects and Theories**

Mass media “are considered an important social agent, transmitting attitudes, perceptions, images and beliefs” (Weimann, 2000, p. 15). With each day bringing an opportunity for advances in technology to happen, mass media consume our lives more and more. Media are agents for making change or shaping our views of the world. Several theories demonstrate the effects of media and our relationship with media today including thoughts from communication specialists Marshall McLuhan, George Gerbner, and Neil Postman. These communication concepts – “the medium is the message”, cultivation theory, and media metaphors – help validate the idea that society sees student-athletes the way that media portray them.

Marshall McLuhan was a man who revolutionized the way the world sees media and its effects. His main arguments in research conclude that “mass communication has altered our perception of 20<sup>th</sup>-century life” and that “...the content of communication is dictated by its form” (Fisherman, 2006, p. 568). More specifically, McLuhan argues that the content of

media is not the message; rather, the medium itself reveals the message in its form. In relation to the analysis of student-athletes in the media, one can see a difference in the way each type of media visualize or rhetorically define this identity. Film and television have common themes that reveal student-athletes as extremes, either bad influences or positive role models in society. In advertisements, student-athletes are more powerfully and positively portrayed. In other visual media from student-athletes themselves, society sees this identity in a more realistic way to better define what a student-athlete is despite stereotypes. McLuhan's ideas about media messages directly correlate to the analysis of the representation of student-athletes in visual media.

In addition to McLuhan, George Gerbner is a communication studies scholar who researched media that led to the creation of cultivation theory. Throughout his research, "he was exclusively concerned with the influence that a much broader scope of messages gradually exerted on the public as people were exposed to media messages in their everyday lives" (Potter, 2014, p. 1016). Furthermore, Gerbner "claimed that there were certain mass-produced meanings that were widespread throughout the entire mass media environment," and "the widespread meanings presented across all media cultivated public beliefs" (Potter, 2014, p. 1016) as a result. This connection between media messages and public beliefs is central to his cultivation theory. These messages, he proposes, "...form 'a common culture through which communities cultivate shared and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence'" (Potter, 2014, p. 1016). Based on this theory, the way that media represent student-athletes can influence our culture and our understanding of student-athletes as an identity. The media messages cultivate, or encourage, certain truths

about them; therefore, society relies heavily on the media to make judgments about identities including student-athletes.

Both McLuhan and Gerbner have contributed to the discussion of media effects and messages in relation to culture and society. To add to the conversation, Neil Postman (1985) believes that “Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice” (p. 3-4) as he writes in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. He further suggests that media messages are not “concrete statement[s] about the world” but are rather “like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality” (Postman, 1985, p. 10). In other words, the media present messages that are not blatant or obvious to society, but they still have an effect on the way we perceive reality through their metaphoric suggestions. Postman also claims that “Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like” (1985, p. 10). This statement especially supports the argument that society’s understanding of certain identities, specifically student-athletes, mirrors the media’s representations of such identities. Therefore, stereotypes arise that persist in our culture that are cultivated throughout generations, as Gerbner suggests, and are reflected in media that are extensions of ourselves according to McLuhan’s theory.

### **Defining “Student-Athlete”**

As one applies these communication concepts to examples in media, a perception or definition of identities can form. Student-athletes, in relation to this analysis, can be defined

by the media and by the history of the term itself. “Student-athlete” is a term that was coined by Walter Byers, the President of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), in the 1950s. According to *The New York Times*, it was a method to combat the “player-employee paradigm” that was a “‘serious, external threat’ to collegiate sports” (*NY Times* Editorial Board, 2014). After a collegiate athlete became injured while playing football in 1953, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that he was “eligible to receive workers’ compensation” (*NY Times* Editorial Board, 2014). In order to deter every injured student-athlete in the future from receiving workers’ compensation from the NCAA, Byers created the term, “student-athlete” to keep the NCAA from being legally and financially responsible for such instances. The term “student-athlete” was then published in all NCAA rules and regulations to sustain the idea that collegiate athletes are students first, athletes second, and are not professionally employed by the college or university (*NY Times* Editorial Board, 2014). Only in the interest of the NCAA was the ambiguous term “student-athlete” created as a “sophistic formulation design” to “conjure the nobility of amateurism, and the precedence of scholarship over athletic endeavor” (Branch, 2011). Since the 1950s, it has been beneficial to the NCAA in numerous liability lawsuits. As the term “student-athlete” is ambiguous, so are the meanings within media that give society the information with which to form perceptions of the identity of student-athletes. Despite ambiguity of this rhetoric, it is up to media viewers to define student-athletes according to their backgrounds or previous understandings and their interactions with media.

## Summaries

### Analyzed Films

*Rudy*, a film directed by David Anspaugh (1993), encompasses the life of a boy that dreams of becoming a football player for Notre Dame. From a young age, he starts playing football with other boys, but he is designated “all-time center” because his size limits him from playing other positions with the bigger boys. Growth, both physically and figuratively for Rudy, is a common theme throughout the film. Despite doubts from his family, friends, and the people he meets along the way, Rudy does his best to fulfill his dream and become a Notre Dame football player. Going lengths that other people would not be willing to go, he puts in the time and effort to get where he wants to be. While he tries to attend football games, joins the field maintenance crew, and attempts to blend in with student boosters, Rudy works his way to become a player, demonstrating that student-athletes have persistence and a growth mentality in this movie.

*Coach Carter* (2005), directed by Thomas Carter, is another movie revolving around student-athletes. At an inner city school in Richmond, Virginia, the Richmond High School basketball coach is looking to retire. The man asked to replace him is Ken Carter, a two-sport All-American from George Mason University who owns his own business in town. When he takes the position, he introduces himself to the team and shares a contract with them that they must sign and return if they are to play for him. The student-athletes, perceived as undisciplined and disrespectful at first, do not understand the purpose of the contract. Throughout the movie, these student-athletes run into issues with Coach Carter but develop as players and young men to reflect themes that characterize student-athletes: application to the real world, privilege, and academics as priority.

*We Are Marshall* (2006), directed by Joseph McGinty Nichol who is also known as “McG”, is a movie that is quite unique from the typical visual story about student-athletes. It



is about the rebuilding of a football program at Marshall University after a tragic plane accident that killed all student-athletes, coaches, faculty, and boosters aboard. Although the story is set apart from other sports movies, it has common themes and patterns that define student-athletes and are relevant to this analysis including concepts relating to perfection, community involvement, and growth in the athletic process.

*Undefeated* (2011) is a documentary directed by Daniel Lindsay and T.J. Martin about a low-income football program from Manassas High School in North Memphis, Tennessee. It is a visual story that presents high school student-athletes as individuals who come from off the streets to build character and a future through football. The head coach serves as a major proponent in the development of these student-athletes. He inspires them by driving them to do better academically and physically. This documentary specifically shows student-athletes in the following ways: goal setters, underdogs, and community leaders.

### **Analyzed Television**

*30 For 30* is a television documentary series that premiered in October of 2009 and has continued since then on ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Networks). A different filmmaker produced each film to share stories of athletes and themes that surpass the sports themselves. Many of these *30 For 30* films are about student-athletes or college sports programs. In particular, “The U” (2009) – directed by Billy Corben and Alfred Spellman – is one that shares the story about the football team at the University of Miami. The numerous interviews of coaches, former players, agents, and others associated with the University of Miami reveal the origin and development of the “bad boy” persona of these football players especially. In addition, this particular film demonstrates common

themes in sports involving student-athletes: being the underdog, having an ego, and bringing the community together.

“Pony Excess” is an ESPN *30 For 30* television film directed by Thaddeus D. Matula that aired on December 11, 2010, about Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, and the NCAA’s harsh punishment and suspension of the program – also known as the death penalty – for numerous recruiting violations and scandals. “Pony Excess” (Matula, 2010) tells the story of the quick rise of the Mustang football program and its massive downfall as soon as the NCAA and the media uncover scandals involving money and recruiting. In a state where football is oftentimes considered a religion, college athletics became a big business when SMU and other schools started offering incentives for committing to their schools (Matula, 2010). Throughout this *30 For 30* film, themes surrounding the student-athlete identity emerge: unfair advantages, societal status, renegade image, and making a comeback.

*Friday Night Lights* (2006), a television series directed by Peter Berg that aired on NBC, is about a small town in Texas that revolves around high school football and the local Dillon High School Panthers. It shares of the struggles that come with being a football player and student-athlete as well as the struggles of a community centered around football. A new coach, Eric Taylor, absorbs the role of head football coach for the Dillon Panthers. With this role comes pressure unimaginable to him with the job of coaching the number one high school team in the state of Texas. The television show also reveals the stories about student-athletes, highlighting certain stereotypical ideals about this role as well. *Friday Night Lights* (2006) is an inspiring show that promotes passion for sport, community involvement, and achievement.

### **Analyzed Advertisements and Online Broadcasts**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association, otherwise known as the NCAA, is an organization of representatives that supply rules and policies for college athletics programs. As an organization, they have committed to prioritizing student-athletes' wellbeing, academics, and fairness to give these individuals opportunities in college sports and beyond (NCAA, n.d.). In order to advertise their core values and objectives, the organization broadcasts advertisements throughout the media, especially commercial videos for television and for their website. Some of the main videos or commercials help define student-athletes as an identity according to the NCAA.

Another medium that contributed to this analysis is videos created by TED, a nonprofit organization that commits to sharing thoughts globally through digital technology. Two videos especially reveal details about the representation of student-athletes in the media. Richard Carthon, a former student-athlete from Tulane University, shares his thoughts on the "untold story" of student-athletes in the video recorded on March 10, 2016 at an independent TED<sup>x</sup> event (TEDxTU, 2016). He reveals from his own experiences that student-athletes reveal qualities like focus, integrity, discipline, production, and teamwork. Martellus Bennett is a former collegiate and professional athlete from Texas A&M who speaks of society's perceptions of athletes as incapable of creativity during his TED Talks video on March 5, 2016 (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). He challenges this perception of athletes and calls the audience to rethink the current representations of athletes instead.

### **Winning and Perfection**

In sports or any competition, a team or individual is determined as either a winner or a loser. For many student-athletes, the pressure to win is high. Sometimes even winning is

not enough for some people. Instead, perfection is a concept that student-athletes chase repeatedly. Unachievable, perfection is projected onto student-athletes as seen throughout media messages in *We Are Marshall* (2006), and the results of winning in the gym can be translated to winning in the real world in *Coach Carter* (2011) for example. The coaches in each of these films are the vehicles to share this concept with their teams but with differing approaches. The first coach from *We Are Marshall* (2006) gives winning a weight that implies winning is important above all else. In opposition, Coach Carter himself portrays to his basketball team that little efforts like following a contract and being disciplined on the court will transfer into the real world and bring wins in terms of success. It is evident that film as a medium shares this common theme of perfection and winning with both of these films as examples.

In *We Are Marshall* (2006), the head coach of the football team prior to the plane crash introduces the idea that winning is everything. He tells his players, “Fellas, you gave a good effort out there today, but let me be clear about this. A good effort is not enough” (Allgood, Fay, Iwanyk, Linden, Martinez, McG, Mednick, O'Connor, Tull, & Viola & McG, 2006). He goes on to say, “I’m proud of you, but I will not accept losing with you. Because there’s only one thing they judge us on, and there’s only one thing people remember. And it ain’t how we played the game. Winning is everything” (Allgood et al., 2006). Stating that effort is not enough implies that his players are inadequate, and their energy put toward winning was not sufficient for this game. Their loss is not something that the coach accepts, and his stating that winning is everything implies that the players are less valuable after a loss. It also contributes to the idea that student-athletes are only of worth if perfection or winning can be achieved. According to the rhetoric presented in *We Are Marshall* (2006),

student-athletes are pushed to perfect themselves. Perfection is a goal that is enforced by coaches and authority figures, and *We Are Marshall* (2006) is a movie that serves as an example of this theme.

One theme expressed throughout the movie *Coach Carter* (2011) is that life lessons can be learned from basketball and applied to the real world. Coach Carter tries to continually express this ideal with the introduction of the contract and with other team rules. On game days, the players must dress in a jacket and tie to look professional. They must maintain a 2.3 GPA, above the 2.0 GPA requirement for all other student-athletes. Both of these rules are included in the contract as well. Specifically he tells his players that “winning in here is the key to winning out there,” meaning winning in the gym has a direct relationship to winning in life after sports (Carter, Gale, Morales, Robbins, Scanlon, Sumpter, Toffler, & Tollin, & Carter, 2005).

Winning is a concept with an ambiguous meaning. It can be quantitative, as in the number of touchdowns or baskets, or it can be qualitative, as it is an assessment of success in the real world apart from athletics. Both of these means to define winning are present in films about student-athletes both in high school in college. Therefore, these media sources give the audience concepts with which to build an understanding of student-athletes as seekers of winning and perfection.

### **Community Influence and Hero Complex**

In the community, student-athletes stand out as they are in the spotlight just by assuming a role on a team. This involvement in the community atmosphere can help or hurt a student-athlete’s image. In *We Are Marshall* (2006), student-athletes use their community to rally around each other in order to save Marshall University’s football program. To this

community, football is a stronghold during a time of processing and healing after the unfortunate plane crash that changed their town. Similarly, the *30 For 30* film, “The U” (2009), includes the story of rebuilding the Miami football program. It was the student-athletes who helped lead the team to wins and helped to give the community something to believe in again. In *Friday Night Lights* (2006), the student-athletes on the football team are involved in the community when they help coach and mentor a younger football team of aspiring student-athletes. These young boys look up to their players like Jason Street, the quarterback, giving the high school student-athletes a subtle hero complex. In *Undefeated* (2011), a coach shows his players that being athletes helps build character and allows these student-athletes to be better members of the community with selfless acts. Both film and television highlight the key positive aspects of student-athletes, especially pertaining to the concept of community leaders with heroic qualities.

After the plane crash tragedy occurred in *We Are Marshall* (2006), the football program’s future was in jeopardy. Instead of giving up and suspending the program for good, student-athletes and members of the town in Huntington, West Virginia, gathered outside of the Board of Governors’ meeting to show their support and love of the game. The President of the University had no other choice but to continue the program and search for a new coaching staff. In this moment football is key to the development and emotional healing process of the town as a community. Football helps this town embrace the idea of community, and this theme presents itself throughout the movie as people show their support for student-athletes. This idea of community presents itself with student-athletes as the core and inspiration of it. Without Nate, a player who stayed home from the game the weekend of the plane crash, the crowd would not have gathered together to make a change. In this

example, student-athletes reveal themselves as characters who are community-involved and inspire action as they lead by example.

At the University of Miami after the reconstruction of the football program with new coaches and players, the community began to rally around the team after an appearance in the local Orange Bowl game. As mentioned in “The U” (2009), these players were now “young men who united the city” (Corben & Spellman, 2009). Football gave Miami a reason to celebrate their town, their community, and the people in it, especially the football players. Before 1979 and early 1980s, Miami would never be considered to play in the Orange Bowl. After 1979, however, Coach Schnellenberger put the team on the map and helped this program to win more than one national championship. These student-athletes started to be viewed with a hero complex as they were highly praised for their performances on the field.

The pilot episode of *Friday Night Lights* (2006) opens with a voiceover from a local radio station advertising that it is Monday morning, which means there are only four days until the Dillon Panthers play another football game. The inclusion of a countdown until the next game promotes the idea that the town itself – media included – emphasizes the importance of football. It is more than a game to this town; rather, it is a lifestyle and a reason to rally around each other. This idea of community involvement demonstrated by student-athletes appears in this first episode of *Friday Night Lights* (2006) when clips of the high school team are seen helping younger boys play and practice football. Jason Street, the quarterback for the Dillon Panthers, talks to the kids afterward and inspires them to keep playing and achieving their goals. One of the young boys asks Jason if he thinks God loves football. Jason replies, “I think everybody loves football” (Berg, 2006). This quote endorses

the idea that this sport and these student-athletes are not just playing a game, but they are bringing together everyone involved, including the community members and younger generations who look up to student-athletes as role models. Using the word “everybody” is a clear indication of this inclusiveness as a community. The quote also brings religion into the conversation, a theme discussed later in this analysis.

In addition to these arguments, the coach in *Undefeated* (2011) introduces the idea that if one does something for someone else, he might be better for it. Building character and community are substantial to these student-athletes’ experiences at this high school. Sports should not be just about helping yourself get better, but sports help these student-athletes become better community members. Putting others first and putting a team first are selfless acts that are demonstrated by this football program that influence the representation of student-athletes in visual media.

Based on the rhetoric and visual concepts presented in these media sources, society can interpret student-athletes as individuals who are team-oriented. They are people who bring others together for a purpose whether that purpose is to inspire or to lead. Giving the community a reason to come together is one of the unintended objectives of athletics, and student-athletes themselves are the ones who promote this unity. As a result, student-athletes are often seen as heroes or role models as they involve themselves with members of the community or serve as icons for leadership and inspiration.

### **Goals, Expectations, and Pressure**

Coaches and other authority figures put pressure on student-athletes to perform and to meet expectations. In order to have these results, goals must be determined and met. Visual media show that student-athletes have goals to live up to expectations of their team and



others. *Undefeated* (2011), *Friday Night Lights* (2006), NCAA advertisements, and TED Talks are media that demonstrate these qualities of student-athletes positively and more realistically as media in comparison to other themes present throughout media.

In *Undefeated* (2011), Bill Courtney, the head coach of Manassas football, shares that football reveals character. It is the responsibility of these players to play hard and show the city what they are about. This team has goals, and each student-athlete helps themselves and each other to work toward these goals. This concept is one of the characteristics of student-athletes that is commonly presented in visual media. Student-athletes are hardworking individuals who are goal-driven and work toward achievement. *Undefeated* (2011) shows the process of a football program that aims to be goal-driven.

Despite the differences in character of student-athletes, expectations of student-athletes remain steadfast. In *Friday Night Lights* (2006), Coach Eric Taylor tells his team in the locker room before their first game, “There’s been a lot of talk about expectation lately. Expectation of what we should be able to do – to win. People are expecting quite a bit” (Berg, 2006). With these words, the viewer has an understanding that student-athletes have the weight of expectations on their shoulders. Not only do they have expectations for themselves, but the community, their teammates, their coaches, and their school all put expectations on them as well. He continues, “I expect you boys to execute. I expect you boys to play football” (Berg, 2006). These expectations from the coach are constantly on the minds of these football players. Expectations come with being a student-athlete, and *Friday Night Lights* (2006) is a television show that demonstrates this attribute of the lives of many student-athletes.

An NCAA commercial about student-athletes and fairness discusses scholarships and equal opportunities. Although the video discusses more about the NCAA's efforts than about student-athletes, it still reveals certain qualities about the representation of student-athletes. The dialogue, "We're committed to...covering the full cost of attendance because college costs go beyond tuition," implies that student-athletes on scholarship are given an opportunity for education that they may otherwise not be able to afford (NCAA, n.d.). The voiceover also states that the NCAA is committed to "keeping dreams on track" and "creating equal opportunities and inclusive environments" (NCAA, n.d.). This text demonstrates that student-athletes have dreams or goals that are fulfilled by being a college athlete, and it demonstrates the efforts of college sports to become environments that are safe and accepting as expectations. Using the word "dreams" is a way to show that being a student-athlete is an achievement or a success in itself. "Opportunities" is a word that implies goals can be achieved when certain situations or circumstances present themselves. When a student is given the opportunity to be a student-athlete, he or she has expectations to uphold, including making college athletics an inclusive environment. Representing student-athletes in this way sheds a positive light on their identity when other media sources may not.

Richard Carthon in a TED Talks video (TEDxTU, 2016) shares about the level of discipline and the expectation of production that student-athletes have. Producing high grade point averages, statistics in sports, and time spent in the community are a few of the expectations he lists (TEDxTU, 2016). All of these are expected to result in success according to society. This expectation is another stereotype of student-athletes in the media, including this TED video.

Using rhetoric that implies responsibility and opportunity allows audiences to believe that student-athletes are continuously pressured to meet goals and expectations. Having goals and keeping on track to achieve these goals is a positive process in society. As student-athletes reflect this process in media such as *Undefeated* (2011), *Friday Night Lights* (2006), NCAA advertisements, and TED videos, media audiences can gather that student-athletes have encouraging qualities in addition to the bad characteristics that are so often portrayed in media.

### **Growth, Failure, and Redemption**

Much of the activities that student-athletes complete daily in order to perform in their sport require practice until growth can be seen in the process. Sometimes failure results instead of success, but redemption is a theme that is commonly associated with student-athletes in the media much like the process of growth and learning from failure. *We Are Marshall* (2006), *Rudy* (1993), “The U” (2009), and “Pony Excess” (2010) are media sources that demonstrate these themes for student-athletes. One can see that film and television are the main media that highlight these qualities of student-athletes. This observation reveals that scripted media, whether or not they are based on true stories, show student-athletes in a more positive way even when failure arises.

Growth is a theme in *We Are Marshall* (2006) as student-athletes practice and perform as a team. The new coaching staff including head coach, Jack Lengyel, demonstrates that athletes are athletes no matter their athletic background. He recruits players from all other sports teams at Marshall University to build his program. As he does so, he proves that student-athletes are versatile in their abilities, and a successful team uses the strengths of each player in order to compete as a team. A soccer player can join the

football team to be the kicker, and a baseball player can play football to tackle like he tackles a catcher scoring at home plate. These players from various backgrounds all become part of something that is bigger than themselves. Coach Jack Lengyel brings them to the gravesite of six unidentifiable football players from the plane crash. He tells them that this is their past, and this is where their program has been. The buried players represent who they are as a team today. He also tells the players that their opponent that day does not know their heart. If they lay their heart on the line out on the field, they will not be defeated. Sure enough, the Marshall Herd defeats their opponent later that day despite the doubts at their first home game since the plane crash. The growth that this program makes throughout the movie exemplifies that student-athletes are versatile and have an abundance of heart while playing for a purpose. These student-athletes see the progression and precedent of how they have gotten to where they are as players. They recognize this growth as a process, and they play with a purpose to honor former players and to grow as individuals.

While trying to accomplish his goals, Rudy runs into the idea of failure along the way in *Rudy* (1993). When he never earns the chance to dress out for a home game, even during his final season, he decides to quit. When he runs into the man who hired him as part of the field maintenance crew, Fortune, he admits to Rudy that he was a Notre Dame football player also. He quit after sitting the bench for two years and has regretted it every day since. Fortune inspires Rudy to go back to practice and finish what he started. Determination in addition to persistence is another common theme among student-athletes in their representation within the media.

At the start of the football program at the University of Miami described in “The U” (2009), it was difficult to get people in the stands of the stadium. Free tickets were even

offered at the local Burger King just to get people to come out and watch the team. Coach Howard Schnellenberger with a great coaching resume decided he wanted to save the program in 1979 and turn the team around to win a National Championship. His recruiting began in the neighborhoods of the Liberty City section of town, otherwise known as the “hood.” With the rising crime rates and numerous riots occurring in this part of town, young men were trying to escape their circumstances. Football was the way to do just that. Kevin Brinkworth, a former running back on the team, says “That’s why you had some of the hungriest football players you’ve ever seen coming out of these communities” (Corben & Spellman, 2009). Football was the sport of choice and a way of life to these young men, and Coach Howard Schnellenberger gave them a chance. These themes of second chances and redemption are recurring throughout this *30 For 30* film and throughout other media as well.

In “Pony Excess” (2010), 1989 was the first season back from the suspension of the SMU football program with Coach Forest Gregg as the newly hired head coach. After predicted to have a losing 0-12 season, they surprised everyone by beating Connecticut in their second game of the season. This win gave the program hope after the death penalty, but the team would soon begin losing and all hope was diminished. Skip Bayless from the Dallas Times Herald in 1982-1991 described this team as a “ragtag, under-talented bunch” that was “lost” (Matula, 2010). From 1989 to 2008, SMU had only one winning season. With a new Athletic Director, SMU hired Coach June Jones in 2008 to help turn their program around and become competitive again. Since his hire, the Mustangs have recovered from the death penalty in the 1980s, and SMU was described as “a program that’s rising from the ashes” (Matula, 2010). This story of loss and redemption is inspirational to the world of sports.

With the University of Miami and Southern Methodist University in the media as examples, viewers see that student-athletes compile teams that demonstrate growth and redemption together. Overcoming losses to rebuild entire programs, student-athletes are the reasons these programs had success. Student-athletes exhibit growth in character and performance throughout media as individuals and teams, as demonstrated by these movies and television films.

### **Athletics versus Academics**

The very concept of the term “student-athlete” presents a tension between the concepts of academics and athletics. Throughout media as well, there are oppositions in the perception of which concept is a priority to these individuals. *Coach Carter* (2005), TED Talks speakers Martellus Bennett (2016), *30 For 30s* “The U” (2009) and “Pony Excess” (2010), and NCAA promotional videos all demonstrate this tension between athletics and academics that sometimes implies that student-athletes are careless about academics according to media. However, some media show academics as a priority for student-athletes. It seems that television especially focuses on academics as less of a priority for student-athletes while advertisements, TED Talks, and films show the value of education in relation to student-athletes.

Coach Carter in *Coach Carter* (2005) believes that basketball, like any other sport, is a privilege. Playing is earned and can be easily taken away. It is up to the players to show their commitment to the team and their respect to their coach if they want to play basketball. When the players do not meet the standards that were agreed upon in the team contract, Coach Carter holds locks out the players from the gym and prevents them from playing. Practices and games are suspended until the players can achieve the desired team GPA.

When parents express their anger and concern at a board meeting, Coach Carter responds: “I’m trying to discipline these boys...I’m trying not to teach them that they are above the law like professional athletes are above the law” (Carter et al., 2005). His argument includes that the players will be out on the streets breaking laws if they break a simple basketball contract, reflecting a “bad boy” image. His words of defense during the school board meeting imply that professional athletes are unlawful. He sees a difference in the role of *student*-athletes, however. These student-athletes are students first, unlike professional athletes. Therefore, this movie contributes to the representation of student-athletes as separate from professionals with priorities that include academics over athletics. This representation is a positive one as Coach Carter changes these boys’ lives for the better and teaches them how to be professional young men in addition to successful basketball players.

Martellus Bennett begins his TED Talk (2016) with a poetic story that acknowledges the role that society plays in the expectations of young athletes. His main argument is that athletes can be creative people too, and athleticism and creativity do not need to be tradeoff qualities despite society’s beliefs. He lists dialogue that represents society’s expectation of young athletes: “Do what they say; don’t think, just play, make bank” (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). This specific rhetoric makes the statement that athletes are followers rather than leaders, and his words reflect that people instruct the athlete to do what others tell them to do. It also implies that athletes should not engage in activities that require intellect because playing sports will allow them to make money, which is more important for status in society. Bennett also says another line in support of this argument: “Buy gold chains, waste good brains; why change the world when you could play games?” (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). Bennett is making the argument that society would rather athletes waste their creativity and

intelligence, and athletes should not try to impact the world when they can just play sports instead. To further his stance, Bennett says, “Give an athlete a book and they give you a look” (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). This statement implies that athletes do not read and therefore do not care about academics, literature, or activities that require brainpower as mentioned. As a former athlete at Texas A&M, Martellus Bennett understands the stereotypes of student-athletes. Especially because he was a creative-minded individual, he felt a constant tension between being athletic and being creative. He describes being a creative athlete as an oxymoron (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016) because society sees these qualities as separate more often than not. Bennett describes that if an athlete hears enough times, “You’re not creative; you’re an athlete,” the athlete will begin to believe it as true (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). Having the student-athlete experience gives his words legitimacy in how student-athletes are represented according to TED media.

In addition to these illustrations of student-athletes, the underlying tension between the terms “student” and “athlete,” is highlighted in “The U” (2009). The term “student-athlete” implies that these individuals are students first and athletes second. In other words, academics should be above athletics. Tad Foote, the President of the University of Miami, wanted to change the bad boy image of his football program by making these student-athletes have a dress code and reflect the idea of being a student first and foremost. Having this dress code will reflect professionalism and a better image to contest the idea that student-athletes ignore the importance of academics.

Education is also a topic of concern in “Pony Excess” (2010). Once the NCAA announced the death penalty – the suspension of the program – for the SMU football program, student-athletes were free to transfer and play immediately for another school



without penalty or threat to their eligibility. As Chuck Cooperstein with KRLD Radio from 1984-1992 said in “Pony Excess” (2010), “A lot of the kids weren’t there for the educational value of SMU; they were there to try to win National Championships” (Matula, 2010).

These student-athletes who transferred to other programs put SMU’s program even further behind as a result of the suspension. It also made the statement that student-athletes are more concerned with their athletic career than their academics, another example of the dumb jock perception of the student-athlete identity.

One of the NCAA’s commercial videos promotes academics and achievement in the classroom for student-athletes. The voiceover makes statements such as, “More college athletes are earning degrees than ever before” and “Education matters, and putting academics first creates a pathway to a lifetime of opportunity” (NCAA, n.d.). This rhetoric makes it seem as though student-athletes are becoming more successful today in their academics than in years past. It combats the stereotype that athletes are “dumb jocks” who only focus on their sport. It also addresses the concern of athletics over academics as a fallacy while making it sound as though student-athletes put academics first in order to succeed down the road in life. In addition, this video contains a statement about the future of student-athletes: “We’re raising the bar for incoming freshmen so they’re prepared when they get to campus” (NCAA, n.d.). The content in this media shows that the NCAA, schools, and student-athletes are making an effort to continually grow and elevate expectations in the classroom. “Raising the bar” is a saying that acknowledges that standards are being increased or set higher. In this case, student-athletes will be expected to perform better in the years before college so that their success rate will be higher in college. The rhetoric in this video gives the

impression that student-athletes are improving in academic expectations, and they are fighting against the stereotypical “dumb jock” image.

Based on the analysis of the tension between academics and athletics for student-athletes, the media present oppositional views of prioritizing these two concepts. Student-athletes can be presented as separate from employed professional athletes as in *Coach Carter* (2005) to demonstrate that student-athletes are still students. Advertisements and TED videos assume that education is valuable to the student-athlete experience and should not be compromised. On the opposing view, media can allow audiences to assume that they care about their athletic careers over academics when they can easily transfer to other institutions to play their sport more often. This tension between academics and athletics give the meanings of student-athletes ambiguity in their media representation.

### **Ego**

Media do not always convey positive messages about student-athletes. Instead, they sometimes reveal messages of ego, power, and aggression. Certain forms of media, especially film and television, reveal these negative messages more often than advertisements and online broadcasts. As the analysis continues, one can see themes that somewhat contradict constructive media messages or bring a different understanding of student-athletes.

A sense of self-esteem is always important, but having a substantial ego can be seen as negative in society. People especially perceive student-athletes as egotistical, and the media potentially play a role in this perception. *Friday Night Lights* (2006) and “The U” (2009) from ESPN’s *30 For 30* series are examples of how student-athletes are represented in egotistical ways.

An apparent pattern in the first episode of *Friday Night Lights* (2006) is the concept of student-athletes' having an ego. Being a self-absorbed jock is a stereotype of all athletes, but this TV series certainly aids its existence by including selfish characters in the cast. One player on the Dillon Panthers team named Brian Williams, nicknamed "Smash," considers his team "the best" because "they have [him]," demonstrating a high level of confidence in himself that comes off as cocky (Berg, 2006). He also tells the media reporter during the interview before practice that his goals include a national championship while playing in college and eventually the Heisman award, an honor given to a top collegiate athlete. These high achievements make his character seem outgoing but for his own benefit.

At the University of Miami after the rising success of the football team described in "The U" (2009), the players began to be treated with more respect. The football players were even viewed above the local professional team, the Miami Dolphins, when it came to the perks of being a well-known athlete like getting into clubs. These boys began to develop egos to go along with this treatment, and they played football with "a chip on their shoulders" (Corben & Spellman, 2009). With this attitude and presence about them, they were viewed as too cocky or overconfident in their ways. These perks and attention that they had not previously known led to these student-athletes' change in character or actions. These concepts contributed to bigger egos and extensive confidence that this particular media – a televised film series – brought to the attention of viewers and the wider society.

After watching these media sources, viewers see student-athletes in this egotistical way and cast this general perception on all other student-athletes, creating a stereotype or false representation that is unjustly applied to all people of this identity. In this way televised media form negative impressions of student-athletes, *Friday Night Lights* (2006) and *30 For*

30 films included. It is success that fuels this overconfidence that can be perceived negatively for all student-athletes.

### **“Bad Boy” Image, Aggression, and Violence**

Having an ego can lead to a negative representation of student-athletes, but there are other ways in which the media portray student-athletes that potentially give them a “bad boy” appearance. The social, economic, or cultural backgrounds of student-athletes contribute to a “bad boy” image. “The U” (2009) is a specific example of how media can emphasize certain qualities of student-athletes to make them seem like negative influences. Moreover, “Pony Excess” (2010) includes stories of former student-athletes at Southern Methodist University that took bribes and monetary gifts in order to choose that school in the recruiting process. These actions were against NCAA regulation and contributed to these student-athletes seeming unlawful. *Friday Night Lights* (2006) includes characters that enjoy aggressive behavior but also includes well-rounded characters who must set aside their gentleness to live up to being a hostile, aggressive athlete.

The football players at the University of Miami were viewed as “bad boys” not only because the coach recruited players from bad neighborhoods but also for their association with 2 Live Crew and rappers. Uncle Luke, a member of 2 Live Crew, wore Miami merchandise in multiple music videos and in public. This branding association drew negative attention to the Miami football program because of his controversial success singing obscene or inappropriate lyrics. His support of Miami football created a “blend of sports and entertainment” and inspired the “bad boy” appeal of the Miami football players (Corben & Spellman, 2009). When the team wore fatigues and army apparel to a NCAA-sponsored dinner for the teams in the 1987 Fiesta Bowl, they sent the nonverbal message that they were

essentially going to war with the other team. They were given a platform as a student-athlete, and they used it to make a statement. The rhetorical implication that a sporting event can be compared to war contributes to the representation of student-athletes as aggressive or violent. It may have been construed in a negative way that these student-athletes wore this particular apparel, but it certainly made a statement and they fulfilled their purpose in wearing army camouflage. In addition, these players' aggression and violence on the field as shown in "The U" (2009) further demonstrates this theme. Their excessive celebration after hard tackles and their refusal to shake hands with the other team demonstrated a lack of sportsmanship and were just two of the ways this team reinforced their representation of being the "bad boys" on and off the field.

A former player from SMU, David Stanley, injured his knees and began taking medication to tolerate the pain while playing. His story is in "Pony Excess" (2010). Eventually, he became addicted to the pain pills. The SMU football program did not want to have that kind of spotlight on them with the NCAA watching closely after their initial recruiting violations. For that reason, they put him in a rehabilitation facility and refused to let Stanley back on the team to finish his degree. When he realized he could take matters into his own hands and be responsible for giving the program bad publicity, he took his story to the media. He admitted during a news interview on himself as a "renegade player" (Matula, 2010) that SMU recruiters had given him money to attend SMU, an illegal act against NCAA violation. This story gives a bad image to the student-athletes receiving the payments even when they know it is against regulation, but it looks worse for the program that carries out the payments. Stanley's allegations led the NCAA to further investigation the SMU football program that led to the "death penalty," or two years suspension of a football

program entirely. True stories such as this one give the impression of student-athletes as rule breakers and “renegades” like David Stanley after his admittance into a rehabilitation facility for drug abuse. Dick Anderson, a defensive tackle from SMU in 1986 said, “Athletics in general, I think, were frowned upon for a number of years after the sanctions were handed down to the football team” (Matula, 2010). Michael Carter, another former player from the 1979-1983 seasons, described that the players during the scandalous years were “basically ignored or shunned away from SMU” (2010), and Craig James, the Running Back at SMU from 1979-1982 said that all the players during those years were “lumped together” and called “bad guys” (Matula, 2010). These allegations gave the entire football program and athletic department a generalized stereotype of being negative. The actions of the SMU coaches and program leaders directly affected the lives of their student-athletes, their reputation, and their involvement with SMU. Events like this one in college athletics unfortunately represent student-athletes as a whole in a negative, antagonistic way that makes society believe that all student-athletes are just as influenced by money, incentives, and rule breaking.

Jason Street, however, fits the ideal student-athlete who is well known, successful, and well behaved in *Friday Night Lights* (2006). At the community pep rally before the big game, the mayor of the Texas town has a conversation with Jason. She tells him, “You’re a nice boy, and you’ve got great manners” (Berg, 2006). She proceeds to tell him to “knock it off” because he “can’t go into a game like that” (Berg, 2006). In other words, the expectation of a football player or student-athlete in general is to put the good manners aside and be just the opposite come game time: intense, aggressive, and hostile. Tim Riggins, another character in this series on the Panthers football team, is always portrayed as

aggressive. During his interview with the media before practice, he tells the reporter, “I just like to hurt people” (Berg, 2006). With alcohol on his breath, his character seems to fit a stereotypical “bad boy” type that is commonly associated with student-athletes as well. From having an ego to having good manners or having a bad reputation, the range of characteristics of a student-athlete are all demonstrated throughout *Friday Night Lights* (2006).

It is evident that the rhetoric in these media can bring viewers to assume that student-athletes are aggressive and hostile. Their behaviors as seen in the media reflect this image, and the identity of student-athletes in reality suffers as a result. Rhetoric of war, violence, and rebellion against rules and people all lead society to believe student-athletes reflect this conduct.

### **Power, Advantages, and Being the Underdog**

Power implies dominance, but it can also comment on a lack of dominance. In certain media, student-athletes and even their athletic departments or programs are represented as powerful or advantageous over others, as in “Pony Excess” (2010). Student-athletes are also represented in a less powerful way as they become known as underdogs in competition in *Undefeated* (2011) and *Rudy* (1993).

O.C. Brown, one of the football players at Manassas High School in *Undefeated* (2011), is an African American teenager who lives with his grandma. His home life is not ideal, but he believes that football is his “way out” of his current lifestyle and neighborhood. He thinks he’ll create a future for himself with the help of football. O.C. is a prime stereotypical representation of a student-athlete in an inner city. Without a father, his head coach shows him that he still has worth and value, especially to their team. Throughout this documentary, student-athletes are presented in a way that makes them seem like the

underdog when it comes to their lifestyles and circumstances. These student-athletes do not let their circumstances define them, and they use football as an outlet to overcome outside obstacles.

Rudy is a student in *Rudy* (1993) who overcomes adversity to achieve the dream of being a student-athlete despite obstacles and doubts of the people closest to him. His inspirational story leaves viewers to see that student-athletes are hardworking, determined, persistent, and goal-oriented. He represents student-athletes in a way that allows viewers to perceive them as people with heart and people who accept challenges even when failure comes their way. In other words, Rudy is another example of an underdog working toward hard-fought success and making his dream of becoming a Notre Dame football player a reality.

Certain events like SMU's recruiting violations described in "Pony Excess" (2010) have led society to believe that all student-athletes receive unfair advantages. This *30 For 30* film especially highlights the monetary and materialistic benefits that recruits have received at certain well-known schools in the past despite NCAA regulation. When SMU signed two sought-after high school football players, Eric Dickenson and Craig James, people began paying attention. Especially when the Mustangs started winning games with the "pony express" duo, as the two players came to be known, people became suspicious of their sudden jump in victories. Student-athletes were receiving cars, cash, apartments, girls, and even benefits like houses for their families back home from boosters and college recruiters. These student-athletes "didn't ask questions, [they] just drove the cars" (Matula, 2010). Because of the actions of authorities like coaches, boosters, and recruiters, these student-athletes started to be seen as crooks. One former SMU player, Dave Richards, says "I'm



tired of being called a crook, and I'm tired of you people sticking cameras in my face," referring to the media and camera crews constantly interviewing athletes and SMU players (Matula, 2010). As college athletics became a business during the 1980s, student-athletes were receiving unnecessary advantages that affected the ways in which they were viewed. Along with these advantages, a power stance arose for SMU. Dallas, Texas, became known as the center of the Southwest Conference where alumni student-athletes came from Southwest Conference schools to do business, work, and live. With all of these alumni focused in one area of Texas, football became an obsession and your team's winning or losing was "a question of personal worth" (Matula, 2010) in the office. This status associated with the outcome of football games placed great pressure and emphasis on student-athletes' performance.

Specifically, this television film allows media audiences to interpret student-athletes as lacking integrity in their intentions and their involvements with scandals. As a contrast, a TED Talks video reveals that not all student-athletes lack integrity. Richard Carthon, a two-sport student-athlete from Tulane University, shares about integrity as one of his main points during his March 10, 2016, online broadcast at an independent TED<sup>x</sup> event. He shows a picture of praying hands to the audience. The artist drew these hands in memory of his brother, and Richard Carthon begins to tell the story behind the drawing. It is a story of a brother who kept his word and sacrificed his hands to help his brother have a better life. Carthon makes this story relevant to student-athletes because he believes they learn the value of integrity in their career as a college athlete (TEDxTU, 2016). This particular media source promotes student-athletes rather than demeans them as he associates this group with the

valuable characteristic of integrity despite what “Pony Excess” reveals about student-athletes.

As demonstrated by these sources, media provide information to audiences that leads them to believe certain qualities of student-athletes as true. When discussing power or lack of power, it is easy to see from the media that student-athletes can receive unfair advantages that give them power over other students or members of society. Receiving these benefits can also harm the image of student-athletes. Some media, however, present student-athletes as having integrity that highlights a tension between these views. Moreover, media audiences can perceive student-athletes as underdogs without any power who must overcome adversity despite circumstance, allowing a more constructive image. Athletics is a means by which these students define themselves, and it is a means by which people who interact with media messages define student-athletes as well.

### **Student-Athletes and Identity**

In addition to themes of leadership and antagonism, the media reveal messages about student-athletes’ identities to add to how viewers and media audiences see them as an identity. These characteristics include race, religion, and gender. Television, advertisements, and online broadcasts of stories and experiences like TED all reflect racial, gender-related, and religious tensions in our society. These media convey messages that force society to have expectations about the abilities of student-athletes of various demographics.

As we analyze the specific identity of student-athletes, the question of worth and value as humans also arises. In a TED Talks video, one of Martellus Bennett’s main points is that “When we look at athletes, we don’t see them as people. We tend to see them as

athletes. We don't see the husband, the father, the son, the mother, the businessman, the scholar, [or] honor-roll students. When we see athletes, we see number[s]" (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). This statement makes student-athletes seem diminished or worthless. He makes it sound as though athletes are reduced to less than humans, and athletes are a group of people who are used to play sports and nothing more. Bennett reveals, "Athlete is just what we do. It's not who we are" (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). Therefore, athletes – student or professional – should be treated as more than just the number on the back of their uniform. Despite this current representation of athletes, Martellus Bennett challenges it: "If a caterpillar can climb onto a tree and go into a cocoon and come out a beautiful butterfly, then how come we can't recreate the way or reimagine the way we think of an athlete?" (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). Bennett hopes that his TED Talk video will help people think about the stereotype that we have developed for athletes as being uncreative or diminished and hopes to change perspective on the group as an identity. He presents the way that this group is represented in society and media, but he himself contradicts it with this specific use of media in order to represent athletes in a more positive light. Martellus Bennett brings this questioning of identity and the role of student-athletes in society that make us reflect on the following demographic themes of race, religion, and gender with a more critical viewpoint.

### **Racial Tensions that Reflect Student-Athletes' Ability**

The color of a student-athlete's skin should have no power in determining athletic ability, but the media portray student-athletes of color in a different way than others. TED talks, *30 For 30* broadcasted films, and NCAA video advertisements highlight these

differences and reveal race as a common theme by which student-athletes can be analyzed according to various forms of media.

In addition to society seeing athletes as uncreative and strictly athletic according to Martellus Bennett, he brings race into the conversation. As an African-American athlete, “the gangs wouldn’t bother you because you had a chance” (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). He grew up learning that “black kids step on your kids to the ground as we run and score a touchdown holding our hands up” (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016). It seems that society has set the perception that African-American athletes are more athletic and more talented on the field than other athletes as demonstrated by the use of words such as “step on” and “score”. In addition to being better athletes, African-American athletes are perceived as uncreative like other student-athletes as well. Bennett says they make highlight films instead of movies (TEDxOrcasIsland, 2016), “they” referring to African-American athletes. Race is a factor in the representation of athletes in society, and Martellus Bennett is a prime example of a person with such experiences that have exposed him to these representations or stereotypes of student-athletes.

Race was a concept addressed in this *30 For 30* film, “The U” (2009) as well. It was said that the “community had a lot of respect that [Coach] would take these types of individuals and take them down there to Coral Gables. At that time, I don’t think a black person could cross the street without getting arrested” (Corben & Spellman, 2009). This quote reveals the racial tensions that were in Miami and surrounding areas at this time. Because Coral Gables had this stereotype of being a rich area where white students go to school, very few African Americans attended the University prior to the 1979 football team. Coach Schnellenberger “changed the whole demographic of how that neighborhood

was” (Corben & Spellman, 2009), bringing race into the conversation around student-athletes.

The NCAA has another commercial that recognizes opportunity as a whole for all student-athletes and potential college athletes. The dialogue shares, “It’s not about where you were born. It’s not about your gender or the color of your skin or whether you’re rich, poor, or in the middle” (NCAA, n.d.). As these words are being said aloud, the viewer sees images of a variety of people with different lifestyles and characteristics all dribbling or shooting a basketball. The viewer can tell that the changing backgrounds or settings of each person illustrate the rhetoric of the voiceover. The commercial has a certain fluidity to it with the edits made between the various genders, races, and clothes of the athletes in the shots to convey to the viewer that athletes are not defined by their gender, race, or class. Student-athletes should not be judged based on outside factors that do not affect their ability to play sports. Therefore, this commercial represents student-athletes as an inclusive identity apart from other media that convey student-athletes as otherwise.

Media acknowledge that there is a racial stereotype to athletes, student or professional. In these instances analyzed, race brings up the idea that the level of athleticism correlates with skin color. Other media sources argue against this stereotype and steer audiences to see that race should not be a factor in athletics. Certain media reveal each perception of student-athletes in conjunction with race.

### **Athletes as Religious in Faith and Sport**

Religion is usually a hot topic in the media, and media about student-athletes is no exception. Although geographical location of the student-athletes is sometimes correlated with the discussion of religion, it is still a theme that is commonly associated with athletics in

general. In *Friday Night Lights* (2006) especially, religion is prevalent to the representation of student-athletes. This television series reflects that television as a medium portrays that religion is a priority for student-athletes. No other media used in this analysis reflect religious qualities of athletics, but television as a widely used, common medium that includes religion possibly to reach more audiences to convey religious messages.

A young football player asks Jason Street of the Dillon Panthers whether or not God loves football. This question from the young boy suggests the inclusion of religion with sports and student-athletes. As demonstrated by this television show, student-athletes tend to reveal their religion through prayer and rhetoric about faith. After Jason's reply to the boy, the room of young and older players all bow their heads and recite the Lord's prayer (Berg, 2006). Later in the episode, Tim Riggins toasts a bottle of beer at a party with Jason Street and his girlfriend, Lilah, and says, "Here's to God and football..." (Berg, 2006). This statement almost equates the sport to God, emphasizing its importance in this aspect as well. Toward the end of the episode during the first football game of the season, Jason gets hit hard as the quarterback and is knocked to the ground. When he does not get up, coaches and trainers discover that he has had a spinal injury. He gets carried off the field on a stretcher and taken to the hospital. When the game is over, both teams come together in the middle of the field to say a prayer aloud.

All of these instances of prayer and religious rhetoric assign a religious quality to student-athletes. It seems to be a pattern for religion and sports to go hand in hand. *Friday Night Lights* (2006) shows that athletics is so highly praised that sports are seen as religious or a way of life. The importance of athletics to people and the importance of religion compliment each other in analyzing the representation of student-athletes in visual media.

### **Genders versus Athletes**

Race and religion are commonly controversial themes to discuss in the media, but defining the identity of student-athletes demands their acknowledgement in addition to gender. Most of the media included in this rhetorical analysis has been about the popular sports of football and basketball. Both of these sports in the provided media have been male dominated and demonstrate masculine qualities, thus implying that athletics is a masculine activity. To contradict this widely accepted idea, the NCAA created an advertisement to show that genders should not be determining factors in athletic ability either.

A third video by the NCAA features female student-athletes. As an identity shown in this advertisement, female athletes are “done” with society’s expectations that they are weak, incapable, or not athletic as a gender. The fact that this video includes dialogue to prove this concept acknowledges that female student-athletes are represented in a way that is demeaning. However, this video speaks out against these standards of female student-athletes set by society. Female athletes of various sports say aloud in the commercial, “Enough,” “Yeah, I’m over it,” and “No thanks” (NCAA, n.d.). These words speak out against the false representation of female athletes that society currently has. They also are powerful as the commercial catches the audience’s attention with these simple, declarative statements. One young woman in the video says, “We shouldn’t need commercials to tell you we’re powerful” (NCAA, n.d.). In other words, this student-athlete is trying to convey to the audience that women are powerful, and that people should already know that they are. This rhetoric implies that commercials and media are a platform for telling society how to view certain groups of people, including female student-athletes. Because of media’s authority in our society, it has the potential to tell us how female student-athletes *should* be

viewed as opposed to how they *are* viewed. Another female student-athlete in the video shares, “Genders don’t play sports. Athletes do” (NCAA, n.d.), indirectly stating that gender should not be a factor in determining athletic ability of individuals who play sports much like race should not be either. It also recognizes that female student-athletes as an identity should not be viewed any lesser than males, especially in the sports arena.

This commercial sends a powerful message that acknowledges that society believes female student-athletes are less capable than male athletes but speaks out against this representation as well. The imperative statements coincide with the images and tone of the commercial to reveal that gender has been a way of defining the worth or ability of student-athletes in the media in the past. The NCAA demands a change in the way female student-athletes are viewed with this advertisement in particular.

### **Conclusion**

After reviewing analyses from films, television shows, advertisements, and online broadcasts as visual media, conclusions can be drawn about the identity of student-athletes according to each specific medium. Media create perceptions of such identities based on rhetoric and visual details, but each medium seems to draw a different idea of the representation of student-athletes. It is vital to analyze such messages in the media because we build our culture around our perceptions of the world. Our actions, thoughts, and values can be influenced by prevalent sources such as the media. Because of this idea, media must be observed, analyzed, and applied correctly to our lives.

Film is a medium that frames certain scenes, characters, and dialogue so that the audience can make inferences about identities of people. When analyzing student-athletes in film, it seems that certain patterns arise that characterize student-athletes in a more pressing



way. The films analyzed were either non-fiction documentaries or films based on true stories. Therefore, the directors of each film must have attempted to follow the plot or storyline of the real-life event in some shape or form, which comments on the validity of media metaphors and cultivation theory. The media attempt to mimic life and roles of identities in reality, but people then use these media representations as metaphors to relate to their own lives and cultivate meaning from them. The films explored in this rhetorical analysis in particular exemplified the themes that were more inspirational and complex: winning and perfection, community involvement and hero complexions, academics versus athletics, power and the role of the underdog, and growth. Each of these categories helps audiences to determine that student-athletes are inspirational with the present motivational themes of becoming student-athletes. The role of film in determining representations of identities such as student-athletes is evident through rhetoric and visual analysis. Film is a storytelling medium that conveys the message that student-athletes are more than below-average students; they are heroes in a society where community is valued, lessons from sports translate to success in the real world, and growth is vital to individuals as athletes, students, and citizens.

Television shows, however, bring audiences to discover that student-athletes are less of an inspiration and more of a negative influence. It seems that television as a medium shares the hardcore realities of student-athletes in college and high school athletics. *Friday Night Lights* (2006) and ESPN's *30 For 30* television films show student-athletes as especially community- and team-oriented, but also reflects many of the negative representations such as aggression, violence, the "bad boy" image, power, and ego. This observation makes the statement that television provides viewers with information to draw

the conclusion that student-athletes are less heroic and more antagonistic. Television is a storytelling medium, like films, but it seems its purpose is more so to convey messages about the type of people that student-athletes are or the values they reflect. Watching films is an experience that leaves viewers inspired while television allows viewers to have more insight into the character or role of student-athletes themselves.

Advertisements and TED Talks broadcasts are both media that reflect themes commonly associated with student-athletes in a slightly different way than films and television do. Looking at the categories of this analysis that deal with more realistic elements of character, advertisements and TED videos show the themes of race, gender, and expectations of student-athletes that the other two media analyzed do not thoroughly address. Both the NCAA and TED address these socially controversial topics and reflect more vividly the reality of what it means to be a student-athlete. It seems that advertisements publicize lifestyle of student-athletes in relation to academics and demographics especially. They are not quite inspirational in the sense that films express, but advertisements and online broadcasts are motivational in challenging the stereotypes set by most fictitious and unrealistic movies and television shows. Martellus Bennett, Richard Carthon, and the NCAA all contribute to speaking out against the current perceptions of athletes and reintroduce student-athletes as an identity with integrity, character, morality, and strength despite demographic and academic standards.

The meaning of student-athletes, according to these various media and their messages, presents certain tensions. The prioritization of academics and athletics is one example throughout all media analyzed. Storytelling media leave viewers to believe that student-athletes are less studious when focused on their athletic careers instead of academics.

Other media that involve rhetoric from student-athletes themselves like Martellus Bennett and the NCAA demonstrate that education matters for student-athletes. In addition to this tension, the media convey student-athletes as both having integrity and sacrificing it for monetary benefits as in the scandal described in “Pony Excess” (2010). Richard Carthon in a TED Talks broadcast refutes this idea, however, when he mentions athletes who make sacrifices for their teammates and reveal integrity. Furthermore, the perception of student-athletes also shows a tension between good and bad character. They are seen as both good citizens that reflect leadership, and they are seen as egocentric, aggressive players. This tension, however, reflects both “student” and “athlete” in the term student-athlete itself. The values that are more commonly associated with good like community involvement and goals seem to reflect their academics and overall character as people. The values that are more negative reflect their athleticism and their actions on the field. These tensions overall illustrate that the perceptions of student-athletes based on media messages are not straightforward; rather, they are open to interpretation based on an individual’s experience with the media and the student-athletes who are directly involved in their lives.

As society continues to create and interact with media on a daily basis, our understandings of other people are constantly being molded and changed. Certain forms of media tell us that student-athletes should behave and think according to standards set by media such as films and television, but there are other media that speak out against this objective such as advertisements and online broadcasts or forums. It is important to address that we use media as a tool to construct and cultivate reality, but the media world should be critiqued and analyzed rhetorically in order to discover the messages from media and create meanings for ourselves from these messages. Student-athletes make up an identity that

appears often in the media, but it is the choice of the individual who interacts with media messages whether or not to perceive student-athlete representations in the same way that the media provide.

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