

Opportunities for Reducing Racial Bias in Team Sports

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Abstract:

This article focuses on what coaches can do to reduce the subliminal bias they may have towards their players through increasing contact with players, increasing awareness, and increasing diversity and inclusion on their sports teams.

Keywords: team sports | racial bias | reducing racial bias | diversity

Article:

Sport coaches have an important role in facilitating a positive team climate. While there is an improvement of racial inclusion within many sports, racial biases still exist in multiple forms (Cunningham, Miner, & McDonald, Citation2013; Price & Wolfers, Citation2010; Zhang, Citation2017). For example, racial bias has the ability to create incivility among players and coaches and can ultimately lead to less commitment among players (Cunningham et al., Citation2013). Therefore, it is the coach's responsibility to take necessary measures in an effort to reduce subliminal racial bias more commonly found in modern day team sports, which foster more contact with a variety of players. This bias is not easily detected or rectified through policy changes used for overt racism (Pope, Price, & Wolfers, Citation2018). If racial bias brings on negative climates that can reduce a player's commitment to their team, it is logical that coaches should foster positive climates (Cunningham et al., Citation2013). This article focuses on what coaches can do to reduce the subliminal bias they may have toward their players through increasing contact with players, increasing awareness, and increasing diversity and inclusion on their sports teams.

Contact

When looking at diverse sports organizations, such as the National Basketball Association (NBA), which has a mix of races on the court, one might think that racial bias would have no place. However, even NBA coaches generally give same-race players more playing time than other-race players (Zhang, Citation2017). After repeated interactions, these biases seemed to minimize, but when these coaches began interacting with new other-race players, their same biases resurfaced. This phenomenon suggests that coaches who are experienced with other-race players may still harbor a pervasive racial bias toward new players. ^[1]Black people are also more likely to view a

Black–White relationship as problematic (Sigelman & Welch, Citation1993). This is based on the contact hypothesis, which states that contact between members of different races helps foster positive racial attitudes (Allport, Citation1954). While increased contact with players seems to aid the coach–player relationship, incoming other-race players such as Blacks may be apprehensive about a White coach or vice versa, and coaches may have pervasive bias that they do not recognize. One way to help lessen this racial bias at the team level is to increase contact with incoming players. Even though Zhang (Citation2017) found that increasing contact with other-race players did nothing to solve the overall bias coaches held, their bias toward individual players whom they had increased contact with lessened. In team sports, it can be easy for coaches to focus more on varsity or elite players and less on new incoming players, but implementing strategies to increase contact with new players can help decrease bias through an increase in contact (Zhang, Citation2017). To further support a better team atmosphere, implementing team-based work early on, such as breaking players into groups of varying races and skill levels, provides the opportunity to reduce racial bias by increasing intergroup contact (Kaley, Citation2009).

Awareness

While increasing contact is effective, even simply being aware of a problem has the possibility of decreasing racial bias in sports (Pope et al., Citation2018). Social and legal policy changes can drastically improve overt bias, but when it comes to subliminal bias, policy tools are less effective. Despite an increase in diversity seen in sports, subliminal bias is still seen among the highest trained coaches and referees due to its pervasiveness (Cabagno et al., Citation2010; Pope et al., Citation2018). It may be hard to come to terms with the fact that many people subconsciously express subliminal bias against their own students or players. However, recognizing this as a potential problem and conducting an inspection on racial bias present within a team in itself by means of survey analysis can create awareness among coaches and players, which can reduce racial bias (Pope et al., Citation2018). Surveys can be given to players at different points throughout the season, with questions regarding how players view specific coaches or if they feel valued.

Diversity and Inclusion

Changing the racial makeup of a refereeing squad has the potential to decrease the effects of racial bias against players (Pope et al., Citation2018). In this same sense, diversifying groups during practice or varying the racial makeup of the coaching staff and players has the ability to decrease racial bias. For example, in a sport such as football, it may be beneficial to cycle the junior varsity and varsity offense coaches, and the same with the defense coaches. Warm-ups in the beginning of practices can include all players and foster more interaction with players who do not typically interact. Successful athletic departments have diverse leadership and embrace different perspectives, and racial bias against minorities is likely to be lower in these types of environments (Cunningham et al., Citation2013). If an athletic department is struggling in these disciplines, it may be worth considering diversity training among the coaching staff and also the players in order to create a more diverse and inclusive team setting. White head coaches are seen as creating more of a sense of incivility among minority players, meaning minority players sense that White head coaches are more rude or unfair to them compared to their White counterparts (Cunningham et al.,

Citation2013). In teams with a majority of or all-White coaching staff, diversity training should be a priority.

Conclusion

This article reviewed three avenues through which subliminal racial bias can be decreased or mitigated among sports teams. More specific coaching strategies are suggested as follows:

1. **Increase contact with players and introduce team-based work.** At the beginning of each sport season or as new players join, it may be helpful to increase contact with these new players in order to decrease racial bias toward individual players. While this decreases bias between coaches and new players, this method will not carry over into future seasons with brand new players, so it must be repeated each season.
2. **Increase awareness of potential racial bias problems.** While it may be hard to come to terms with, being aware of racial biases present in the coaching staff can change coaching dynamics and decrease subliminal racial bias in itself. Conducting an assessment on coaching interactions can further shed light on this issue. Having a third party not affiliated with the specific sport observe coach–athlete interactions can help identify why some coaches may be more effective with all of their players. The results from this observation can then be applied in order to discuss effective coaching strategies that minimize racial biases.
3. **Implement diversity and inclusion methods, especially among coaching staff.** Creating a more diverse coaching staff and diversifying practice groups in terms of race can increase inclusion and decrease racial bias among coaches and team members. This strategy should especially be considered on teams where the coaching staff is mostly or all White, as minority players perceive more bias in these coaching environments.

With these techniques in mind, coaches can decrease racial bias on their teams of which they otherwise may have been unaware.

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