

# THE DECONSTRUCTION OF AMATEURISM IN AMERICAN SPORTS

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## Abstract

Despite all the good that amateur sports have brought to American society and its members over the past several decades, amateur sports have also served as a context for fostering some of life's nastier habits. The deconstruction of amateurism in America has happened, at least in part, because of a societal recognition of the need to re-construct amateurism so that it is more equitable, and to replace what was considered "fair" and "right" with something closer to actually level playing fields all across America. To gain a richly detailed understanding of the phenomena of the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports, a qualitative research approach was used for data collection and analysis. This analysis included a review of the three most prominent governing bodies in amateur sports in America, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and the Olympics, as well as the factors that brought America to that seminal moment at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics – the *Black Power Salute*. Despite the disparaging negativity that was used to characterize the *Black Power Salute* at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968, that act ushered into the collective American societal contemplation the *idea* that there were things that were wrong *in* amateur sports, and wrong *with* amateur sports in America – and effectively allowed for the possibility that amateurism itself had strayed from purity of intent (Andrews, 2018; Greene, 2012). Over the decades following, that awareness grew into moments of reality which collectively formed a full deconstruction of amateurism in American sports. The constellation of events and forces enacted following the *Black Power Salute* caused a steady breakdown of American amateur sports. Accordingly, this study details the factors that have cooperatively contributed to the full deconstruction of amateurism in American sports.

**Keywords:** *American amateur sports, governance, deconstruction.*

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, amateur athletes participating in amateur sports in America have enjoyed social interest and cultural popularity for more than a century. Accordingly, amateur sports have emerged as a pivotal social construct in contemporary American society – solid and entrenched. For millions of American young people, amateur sports have provided a healthy context of opportunities for competition, creative expression, social interaction, and lifelong learning. Likewise, for millions, even billions of American adults, amateur sports have been much of the same, as well as a source of entertainment, a context for personal identity, and an extension of personal well-being.

However, for non-white Americans, amateur sports have been something less than all that. Yet, given the dominance in sport that Black athletes have established since being allowed to play on the same fields and courts as their counterparts – sometimes something more as well. This may perhaps be best characterized as being forced into a contradiction of sorrow and desire. Why? Because despite all the good that amateur sports have brought to American society and its members over the past several decades, amateur sports have also served as a context for fostering some of life's nastier habits, including but not limited to prejudice and discrimination, cruelty, and persecution, and also hatred and oppression.

This carefully constructed social mainstay of amateur sports has needed something akin to a major overhaul – a breaking down of the system or systems that have represented unfettered leverage against an overwhelming number of the athletes who have sacrificed so dutifully for the success of the social construct of amateur sports. Accordingly, this study is an examination of the deconstruction of amateur sports in America over the past several decades, and the factors that have contributed to the breaking down of this popular societal sanctuary.

## 2. Purpose

This examination has a fourfold purpose: 1) To identify the presence and impact of the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports, 2) To increase awareness of the effects of the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports, 3) To identify and explain the pros and cons of the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports, and 4) To identify and examine the effects of the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports on Black athletes in amateur sports in America.

## 3. Methodology

To gain a richly detailed understanding of the phenomena of the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports, a qualitative research approach was used for data collection and analysis. Accordingly, this study was phenomenological, where both primary and secondary sources were used in this study, yielding a blend of information containing depth and quality, triangulated among and between published case study results, public commentaries, newspaper publications, research papers, popular literature, web-based publications, textbooks, and empirically based journal articles. Accordingly, data from these sources were organized and interpreted such that patterns emerged from their intersections. These patterns and their associated impacts were identified, clarified, and highlighted, and are presented in the following paragraphs.

## 4. History of amateur sports in America

This section includes a review of the foundation and growth of amateur sports in America, as well as an examination of the three most prominent governing bodies in amateur sports in America, The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and the Olympics. Operating alongside the American educational system, these para-educational governing bodies have established the operational framework for amateur sports in America.

Pruter (2013) reported that the earliest forms of amateur sports were casual games and sports events, usually using varied sorts of balls arranged and played by high school students in New England as early as the late 1700s. The games were chaotic and inchoate, so while schoolmasters of the day may have insisted on discouraging any ball playing near their windows, they generally looked favorably upon the boys' games as being good for health and physical exercise, and these first amateur sports games carried on well into the 1800s.

Yet, there were no Black athletes competing in these first amateur sports in America. The institution of slavery left little opportunity for most Black athletes to participate in any sort of leisure, recreation, or sports activities. To the extent that Black athletes were able to participate in sports at that time, their involvement reflected prevailing attitudes regarding race. Black athletes were confronted with enduring the frustration of racial discrimination, both in sports and in society. Unquestionably, the damaging effects of this era are still felt today in both sports and American society at large (Brown, 2008; Kieffer, 2023).

At primarily white institutions, early amateur sports became a vital part of the American social consciousness, even though these sports were still student initiated, driven, and directed. By the 1880s, educational reformers eventually stepped in and took over these sports programs claiming, "Athletics are educational." These same reformers brought student athletics under their regulatory control to make them part of the physical education curriculum (Pruter, 2013).

Black athletes were often kept out of interscholastic high school sports and their competitive presence in high school sports did not appear *en force* until the 1920s. The effects of Jim Crow laws and court rulings such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) served as justification for continued segregation and oppression of Black athletes in amateur sports (Davis, 2008; Pruter 2013, Sammons, 1994).

Conversely, white Americans benefitted from widespread growth across the amateur sports sector. Nationwide reform in amateur sports facilitated educator-sponsored leagues formed in both the cities and the rural areas. Governance of amateur sports began to be implemented, such that students in most areas acquiesced to educator control and passively accepted the new order of things. Educators began to realize that physical education was integral to human development. Adult-sponsored leagues and state associations became firmly established, although transition and implementation of governance was not seamless or smooth (Pruter, 2013).

## 5. Governance of amateur sports in America

When amateur sports in America were still messy, chaotic, and inchoate, there was a distinct need for organization and standardization (Pruter, 2013). Three primary para-educational institutions emerged for the governance of amateur sports in America. These three institutions were the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and the Olympics. These governing institutions set about to bring organization to amateur sports.

The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) was established in 1888 to create common standards for competition in amateur sports, as early leaders of the AAU brought uniformity to athletic competition. In addition, the AAU and its members worked closely with the Olympic movement to prepare athletes for the Olympic Games (AAU, 2023).

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the AAU solidified its role in developing successful athletes and creating opportunities for success in amateur sports competitions. However, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought controversy to the AAU. Resistance to how the AAU was handling certain competitive matters appeared. Soon thereafter, the AAU was deprived of a large measure of its authority and capacity for amateur sports governance (AAU, 2023; Amateur Sports Act, 1978).

In 1906, when the NCAA was established, its early primary function was to regulate the rules of college sports and to protect the players. The NCAA also established an enforcement department to go after schools and coaches breaking their rules. In addition, the auspicious term “student-athlete” was introduced to protect the NCAA from litigation. The power and reach of the NCAA gained momentum. Principles for financial aid, recruitment, and academic standards were implemented as well as competitive divisions, eligibility restrictions, and recruiting violations all aimed at promoting fairness (Harry, 2020; NCAA, 2023).

After the passing of the Amateur Sports Act of 1978, the NCAA laid claim to undisputed control over the charming perception that success in college amateur sports was the ticket to opportunities for participation in sports at the professional level. This has been particularly alluring to Black athletes, due largely to their competitive success. However, virtually all Black amateur athletes have had to contend with a variety of interruptions and challenges to their participation. In addition, successful Black athletes in NCAA sports have frequently found themselves caught between athletic codes of behavior, peer expectations, and all manner of turmoil. Although its leadership has attracted steady criticism over the course of its existence, the NCAA has worked to stay current with the societal issues impacting amateur sports and its athletes (NCAA, 2023; Smith, 2000).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baron Pierre de Coubertin successfully revived the Olympic Games, and he was able to provide compelling leadership of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) dedicated to amateurism. He also gave amateurism a strong ideological tie to the Olympics and the popularity of the Olympics grew. The international bragging rights that came along with winning Olympic events brought unprecedented publicity. Because it was amateurs who were competing, the playing field seemed level in competition. The battlefield was ruled by the best militaries. The track was conquered by anyone who put their mind to it. Feelings of nationalism flourished as amateur athletes became national heroes (Andrews, 2018).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Olympics enjoyed international popularity through the preservation of amateurism and the cultivation of the Olympic Spirit of good will to all. However, for all the good they brought, the modern Olympic Games were not immune to controversy. Threats to boycott the Olympics became a common political tactic to put pressure on rival nations, as a constellation of factors posed threats to the IOC and the sanctity of Olympic amateurism. These factors included allegations of the presence of cheating, the use of the Olympics for political statements, the increased popularity of the Games because of increased access to viewing the Games on television, and a shifting of the collective societal perspective on the importance of maintaining the purity of amateurism (Sammons, 1994).

## 6. Seminal moment

All three of the organizations providing governance over amateur athletics in American sports have played a major role in guiding American athletes in amateur competitions. It was at the Olympics, however, where the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports was initiated. At the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, the world watched, on television and in color, as Tommie Smith and John Carlos, in solidarity and protest of the treatment of Black people, gave the world one of its most prolific moments in sports history.

Zirin (2012) reported that on the medal stand Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised their fists in what was described across the globe as a “*Black Power Salute*.” Further, they wore no shoes to protest Black poverty and oppression, as well as beads and scarves to protest lynching. This moment ushered into the collective American societal contemplation the *idea* that there were things that were wrong *in* amateur sports in America, and wrong *with* amateur sports in America – and effectively allowed for the possibility that amateurism itself had strayed from purely good intentions. The *Black Power Salute* served as the start of the deconstruction of amateurism in American sports because it definitively represented a substantial tear at the fabric that held amateurism together.

## **7. The deconstruction of amateurism in America following the *Black Power Salute***

At the 1968 Olympic Games, the Olympics were transformed, and amateurism no longer meant as much to the Olympics as it had previously. An indelible force within this transformation was the symbiotic relationship between the Olympic Games and television. The impact of television on the Olympics, and vice versa, has been profound. In addition, television and the media have also been instrumental in the development of commercial success for the NCAA and its member institutions. While the full breakdown of amateurism in America may fairly be characterized as having been a slow process, television has augmented and facilitated this dismantling all along the way (Andrews, 2018; Greene, 2012).

The effect of the Amateur Sports Act of 1978 was an ephemeral destabilization of governance power such that governance of amateur sports in America became lopsided. Instituting this imbalance of governance power served to leave amateurism vulnerable to the vices of humanity, and the vagaries of fate. A series of legal challenges directly impacted NCAA governance, and consequently also impacted collegiate amateur sports. Allegations criticized the NCAA for unfairness in its enforcement practices and its use of enforcement power. As mere accusations often do, the allegations of unfairness weakened the entire construct of amateur sports governance. Too much power was in too few hands, and as is widely understood, power corrupts. This dynamic was exacerbated by the flow of money brought by television, and the desire for more of these monies grew intense. Not surprisingly, major lawsuits appeared. Collectively, these legal challenges gave momentum to a growing consensus of lack of faith in the NCAA’s ability to appropriately govern collegiate amateur sports (Smith, 2000). The way amateur sports in America had been constructed was beginning to waver and sway. The deconstruction of amateurism was becoming a crescendo, increasingly headed on its way to a point of no return.

By the end of the 1980s, the professionalization of the Olympics had gained full steam...which seemed to be just fine with the fans – the pros are there for a reason. At the 1992 Games in Barcelona, the performance and success of America’s men’s basketball team, The Dream Team, which was comprised of primarily professional players, was nothing short of sensational. They won every game they played convincingly, by an average of almost 44 points per game. They were so good that their coach did not call a single timeout during the entire Olympic tournament (Greene, 2012). Fundamentally, the Dream Team reinforced the deconstruction of amateurism at the Olympics. In a sense, their presence, performance, and success sealed the deal. Effectively, for America, the Dream Team brought closure to amateurism at the Olympics.

In collegiate amateur athletics, more legal challenges, a student-staged football boycott, and the pressures of media attention collectively served to continue to break down amateur sports governance power. Since the 1980s, athletic programs across the country have implemented changes to meet higher standards for the safety and protection of student-athletes, as power has shifted from the governors to the governed. Also being stirred were public sentiments for amateur athletes to receive compensation for their efforts, effectively pushing the deconstruction of amateurism to the brink of the point of no return (NPR News, 2013).

This point of no return subsequently arrived in collegiate amateur sports in the form of the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) Era. Not surprisingly, the NIL era was ushered into actuality by a sequence of legal actions. NIL essentially references the variety of proposals to allow contractual exchanges where individual student-athletes can profit from the sale of their name, image, or likeness without the threat of losing their amateur status as an athlete. Also present in this dilemma is the student-athletes’ right to compensation for the use of their name, image, and likeness. In 2021, the NCAA lost a crucial NIL legal battle before the US Supreme Court. Just days later the NCAA released an Interim Policy allowing college athletes to financially benefit from their name, image, and likeness (Kessler & Greenspan, 2020). This policy thereby completed the full deconstruction of amateur sports in America.

## 8. Conclusion

These forces deconstructing amateurism in America together have created an elixir of change. This mix, in combination with all that has gone before it, has effectively stripped the concept of amateurism in American sports of most of its meaningfulness, leaving it a shell of what it used to be. Almost without exception, the language used by the defense, in the various legal proceedings promoting the effective deconstruction of amateurism in America, included the term or concept of the preservation of the *purity* of amateurism. As in, amateurism should be preserved for the *purity* of it. This occurred either as a point of distinction from professionalism, or as a suggestion that allowing individuals to be paid for their participation in amateur sports would contaminate amateurism, *and* the values that participants learn as a function of their participation in competition. This is understandable yet has also created something of a disconnect with Black athletes. What cannot be lost in any future research efforts is that *Black athletes are important to the success of amateur sports in America* (Andrews, 2018; Kessler & Greenspan, 2020; Smith, 2000).

Additional and different values need to be included and considered as critical to the reconstruction of amateurism in American sports. New pathways for equity need to be created and old mistakes need to be learned from, rather than repeated. Fortunately, the Post-NIL Era aftermath will include vast expanses of uncharted territory. Given that the NCAA's Interim Policy has left much of the NIL landscape unregulated, there is an undeniable sense of uncertainty, excitement, potential, and risk. Future research in areas associated with amateur sports in America should include a focus on how to use this potential to establish clear pathways for equity in the midst of the uncertainty.

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