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“SAME TIME TOMORROW, KNUCKLEHEADS”: THE RACIAL, GENDERED, AND INDUSTRIAL POLITICS OF TELEVISED SPORTS PUNDITRY

by

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For Rachel

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the racial, gendered, and industrial politics of televised sports punditry, charting the genre's movement from newspaper columns and talk radio programs onto the airwaves of cable television in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The project addresses the question of how popular sports punditry programs on cable television differ from contemporary political punditry programs in their treatment of racial and gender issues. I interpret the rise and sustained popularity of these programs as reflections of various social and political currents, ranging from postracialism and neoliberalism to the more overt racism and sexism of the Tea Party and, later, Trumpism. By critically reading popular pundit programs across major channels like ESPN and Fox Sports 1 (FS1), I link programs like *Pardon the Interruption, First Take, Speak for Yourself,* and *Garbage Time with Katie Nolan* into a broader conversation about racial and gender identity on cable television. I argue that while sports punditry programs on cable feature a greater diversity of racial representation than their political counterparts, this diversity often occurred at the expense of exploring issues of systemic racism in sports and sports media. Additionally, I argue that these programs achieved popularity by trading on both contemporary and historical racial tensions and stereotypes of racialized masculinity to appeal to viewers. I argue that these programs reinforce sport as a postracial utopia while largely denying ongoing systemic racism and sexism in sports, upholding sports as an apolitical meritocracy. While other literature on sport media conducts content analyses of sports news programs and game broadcasts, my dissertation extends this work to punditry programs, studying not just their place in the cable television and sport media industries, but also the racial and gender politics of these programs and their star pundits.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This dissertation critically analyzes a popular yet understudied genre of sports television: the pundit talk show. These programs range from the buttoned-up Sunday morning roundtable of ESPN's *The Sports Reporters* to the daily shout-fest debates of *First Take* and Fox Sports 1's legion of similar programs. While it would be easy to dismiss these programs as simple extensions of talk radio hosts ranting about the ills of modern sports, I argue that these shows achieve success through performances of a racialized hypermasculinity on the part of their hosts. These pundits avoid physical confrontation in favor of verbal smackdowns, many of which feature the same racial and gender tensions present on cable news pundit programs. After chronicling a brief history of sports punditry on television, I examine 4 programs—ESPN's *Pardon the Interruption* and *First Take,* as well as Fox Sports 1's *Speak For Yourself* and *Garbage Time with Katie Nolan*—and demonstrate how each show represents a distinctive moment in culture and politics. I show that, in contrast to popular ideas upholding sports and sport media as an apolitical space, sports punditry on television enacts racial and gender politics on its shows. Even when these shows feature more women and pundits of color than their cable contemporaries, I contend that this greater representation often occurs at the cost of reinforcing numerous stereotypes of underrepresented racial and gender groups and deflects from racial and gender inequalities behind the camera and in the executive offices of these networks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2003, ESPN, the self-proclaimed "Worldwide Leader in Sports," hired conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh to join its *Sunday NFL Countdown* studio lineup. Limbaugh joined a crew of former NFL players and coaches and established ESPN personalities such as Chris Berman. These panelists typically provided opinions and analysis leading up to ESPN's *Sunday Night Football* telecast, discussing weekly matchups, highlights, and other NFL news items. Announcing Limbaugh's hire, then-Vice President of ESPN Programming Mark Shapiro hailed Limbaugh as a "great communicator" and a "fan's fan."[1] Limbaugh's hiring mirrored a similar move by ESPN's sister company ABC Sports three years earlier that brought comedian Dennis Miller into the *Monday Night Football* booth. These hires represented ESPN's strategy of mixing sports with other genres of entertainment in hopes of reviving flagging ratings. Specifically, Limbaugh recalled ESPN executives telling him that, after a relatively uneventful first few weeks of his tenure, he needed to "punch things up…you don't need to be afraid here…we don't expect you to be an Xs and Os football guy."[2]

Four weeks into the NFL season, following this apparent green light to incite controversy, Limbaugh criticized Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb. Specifically, Limbaugh claimed that "the media has been very desirous that a Black quarterback do well," claiming—without offering evidence—that McNabb "got a lot of credit for the performance of his team that he didn't deserve."[3] This racist proclamation fell in line with Limbaugh's lengthy history of inflammatory statements concerning successful African American entertainers and politicians. Despite an apparent understanding from his co-panelists that Limbaugh would strictly "talk football," according to Limbaugh's Black *Sunday NFL Countdown* colleague Tom Jackson, "he [Limbaugh] broke that trust" with his comments and

summarily exited the program under pressure the pressure of the ensuing controversy.[4] ESPN received pressure from sources ranging from Democratic politicians such as Wesley Clark to activists like Jesse Jackson, and McNabb was even defended by an official NFL spokesperson in the wake of this racist attack.[5]

Limbaugh contended that he was never told by ESPN executives to avoid social commentary, and his hire suggests ESPN may have encouraged him to incite controversy beyond his football opinions. However, his racist comments and the firestorm they created highlighted the negative consequences of ESPN's desire to employ and feature bellicose and polarizing commentators in hopes of boosting ratings. This ploy led to an increase in ratings for *Sunday Night Countdown*; the episode with Limbaugh's racist comments was the highest rated episode of the program in seven years.[6] Shapiro publicly expressed his anger that no one on set challenged Limbaugh, lamenting the opportunity for ESPN to, in his words, open up "the floodgates for a national dialogue."[7] Shapiro also confessed in an interview that had Limbaugh not "screwed up" with his racist comments, "he would absolutely still be on the air," implying that the network desired a non-threatening type of controversy from its pundits as long as that did not threaten the financial viability of the ESPN brand.[8]

The controversy and Shapiro's apparent lack of foresight also seemingly violate ESPN's investments in maintaining an apolitical, universally appealing image to sell itself and its advertising partners across demographic markets. Corroborating this desire, in a 2019 interview, ESPN executive Jimmy Pitaro explicated ESPN's desire to appear apolitical in the wake of accusations of liberal bias, stating: "without question our [ESPN's] data tells us our fans do not want us to cover politics."[9] Pitaro also reiterated to his employees explicitly in a 2018 interview that "we are not a political organization."[10] Limbaugh's brief tenure at ESPN marks a vexed and

profitable relationship between sport media and political punditry, linking sports television to the deliberately polarizing rhetoric of political pundits and the broader industrial climate of sport talk radio by promoting "hot takes" on sport issues. In particular, it highlights an emerging connection between hyper-partisan political television and sports television, a genre often presented by networks as politically neutral and inviting. I contend that televised sports punditry operates as an apparatus of what Jay Coakley terms "the great sport myth," in which sports are seen as pure, good, and inherently meritocratic and apolitical by participants, fans, and media alike.[11] Simultaneously, televised sports punditry mirrors the style of political punditry, replicating that genre's reliance on polarization and partisanship that marked political commentary on cable television. Specifically, I posit that televised sports punditry largely upholds the "great sport myth" by using colorblind discourse, framing sport as a site of apolitical character building, and mythologizing its participants. I examine how televised sports punditry allows for media companies to, in the words of Coakley, "camouflage personal interests related to projects in which sport is presented as a tool for solving problems and contributing to individual and collective development."[12]

This historically apolitical imagining of sports networks is best summarized by Shapiro, who stated that ESPN's goal in the 2000s was to be "all things to all people."[13] However, the network's brief employment of Limbaugh implied that if Limbaugh's extreme politics were avoided, hiring pundits could also expand the network's reach into newly segmented markets. Furthermore, employing someone as polarizing as Limbaugh evinces ESPN's desire to solidify the white male conservative viewers Limbaugh attracts, precisely by disregarding many Black consumers and additional viewers who would be turned off by Limbaugh's overtly conservative and racist history.

This dissertation explores the negotiated relationship between the intersection of race and masculinity found in twenty-first century televised sports punditry within the broader industrial contexts of cable television and sports media. Specifically, it examines how the genre of televised sports punditry developed from earlier media forms like print and radio, analyzes the racial and gender politics of sports pundits, and details how the genre interacts with the cable television industry and political punditry more broadly. I critically analyze and contextualize four programs across two large cable networks from 2001 to the present in order to examine change and continuity in how these networks use pundits to enact performances of race and gender. Subsequently, I argue that each program represents elements of the political and cultural currents of its time. These currents range from broader philosophies like postracialism and multiculturalism to specific movements like the Tea Party and Trumpism. I demonstrate that these pundit programs enact the preferred politics of their host channels and parent companies. Focusing on networks owned by both Disney and NewsCorp, I contend that these programs harness punditry and debate to advance political perspectives ranging from moderate to conservative messaging on racial and gender issues. I use these pundit programs as an entry point to a broader discussion of how the television industry shapes the historical and cultural contexts of its programs, analyzing how these shows and their parent networks act as a reinforcement of dominant ideologies and, occasionally, challenge these norms.

Both sports punditry and televised political punditry have roots in talk radio, dating back to the conservative talk radio revolution spearheaded by Limbaugh in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both genres translated seamlessly to television, particularly on cable TV. Sport pundits, as well as popular political television pundits such as Sean Hannity and Keith Olbermann, find success in part due to their ability to utilize what Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey M. Berry term

"outrage discourse." Sobieraj and Berry define "outrage discourse" as "a particular form of…discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses (e.g. anger, righteousness, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents…"[14] The popularity of opinionated radio hosts on both political and sports television at the turn of the twenty-first century implies a willingness of networks to offer airtime to the deliberately polarizing and occasionally extremist politics—which largely privileging whiteness and maleness—of some pundits for the sake of increasing ratings and advertising revenue.

Beyond Limbaugh, ESPN promoted and featured provocative sports pundits such as Jim Rome, Colin Cowherd, Stephen A. Smith, Skip Bayless, and many others, representing the power of punditry and outrage discourse on sports television. ESPN had previously conducted roundtable discussions between sports newspaper columnists on programs like *The Sports Reporters* (1988-2017). The program acted similarly to political news programs like *Agronsky & Company* (1976-1987), *Meet the Press* (1947-), and *The McLaughlin Group* (1982-) in an attempt to demonstrate the value of informed sports opinions and sports journalism, while also mirroring the practices of networks' Sunday morning programming. All of these political debate programs primarily consisted of white pundits.[15]

Beginning with ESPN's *Pardon the Interruption* (*PTI*) in 2001, televised sports punditry nominally diversified the predominantly white image of sports pundits by pairing White and Black sports pundits debating current issues while simultaneously upholding visions of postracialism and multiculturalism developing across the 1980s and 1990s.[16] The subsequent racial politics of the late 2000s and early 2010s, building off decades of white backlash and "silent majorities" culminated in racialized extremist opposition to the Obama Administration

via the Tea Party. This anger found a twin channel in white sports fans and pundits' criticism of minority-dominated sports such as the NFL, NBA, and MLB. Programs like ESPN's *First Take* (2007-) and Fox Sports 1's (FS1) *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* (2016-) and *Speak for Yourself* (2016-) demonstrated a heightened degree of racial tension among their panelists compared to the jovial homosociality of *PTI*, capitalizing on a greater degree of cultural polarization exploited by Fox News and MSNBC in the age of Trump.

Even as sports pundit programs often profess to be apolitical or escapist forms of entertainment, they enact a form of exclusionary politics along gender lines through their masculinist language and virtual lack of discussion of women's sports on their program. Additionally, through the use of racially coded terms such as "uncoachable," "selfishness," and "natural athletes," these pundits operate in a similarly coded linguistic paradigm as their political peers do with coded racial statements such as "personal responsibility" and "respectability." Televised sports punditry extended many of the gender politics of their political peers through this reliance on coded language while modifying it to discuss race in sports.

In addition to racial grievances, sports talk offered an outlet for and reinforcement of American masculinity and gave voice to negative reactions to the gains of third wave feminism, particularly Title IX and the increased female participation in sports it nurtured. Serving as what Michael Kimmel terms "the last locker room, juiced not on steroids but on megahertz," sport talk radio, and later televised sport punditry, was an ideal conductor and transmitter of male outrage.[17] I derive the dissertation's title from Michael Wilbon's daily sign-off that ends each episode of *Pardon the Interruption* (ESPN, 2001-). The mocking exhortation to viewers from Wilbon, while seemingly good-natured, reinforces the combative tenor of sports punditry while

also laying out the expectations of repetitive, continuous conflict between both the show's two pundits and, implicitly, between hosts and viewers.

These televised sports punditry programs represent a broader trend of prizing outrage discourse and politicized market segmentation over traditional fact-focused news broadcasting. This trend was best summarized by the claims of former *First Take* (2007-) producer and eventual FS1 executive Jamie Horowitz, who argued that declining ratings for ESPN's flagship news program *SportsCenter* were due not to declining talent, but, rather, "a genre problem."[18] The problem Horowitz alluded to is the declining ratings and numbers of viewers of traditional news broadcasts due to the wider availability of information through the expansion of the Internet and smartphones. Horowitz recounts how Skip Bayless and *First Take* consistently drew higher ratings with their opinion program than the news-centric *SportsCenter* did from 2015-2016.[19] This trend parallels cable news, where punditry and opinion-driven commentary programs have outstripped traditional newscasts as the highest rated programs on channels like Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC.[20] The same industrial, cultural and technological factors that led to the emergence of political punditry on cable television also influenced the rise and sustained popularity of punditry on cable sports television.

I argue that performances of racialized masculinity on these programs are shaped by the cultural politics of hegemonically constructed philosophies such as postracialism and multiculturalism and, later, movement originating outside of the mainstream such as the Tea Party, #Blacklivesmatter, Trumpism, and #Metoo. I link each program to a specific concept and also a moment in the history of sports media. Beginning with *Pardon the Interruption* in 2001, ESPN proved the format of daily sports punditry could be reliable and profitable for the network. Later ESPN programs like *First Take*, I demonstrate, extended the formula of *PTI*, not just in

terms of running time, but also in their performances of outrage discourse and racialized hypermasculinity. I then explain how *First Take's* ability to monetize racial tension and outrage discourse created a space for programs like *Undisputed* (2016-) and *Speak for Yourself* (2016-) to emerge on rival cable channel Fox Sports 1 (FS1), which largely built its brand on firebrand punditry. The format established by these shows would be later adapted to female-centric programs on both networks, such as *Garbage Time with Katie Nolan* (FS1, 2015-2017). In turn, the negative reaction to these female-centric shows, in addition to criticism of *First Take*, further fueled the rise of reactionary, anti-"PC," male-oriented sports programming on both television and the Internet. My conclusion turns to the consequences of the dominance of sports punditry on television, analyzing how networks like ESPN treat racial and gender controversy, specifically in the age of Trump.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This dissertation interprets sport punditry as a site of greater visual representation for people of color than cable news punditry, but also as a place where racial tensions and stereotypes are regularly staged and exploited to sell to the viewing public and capture ratings. It extends existing scholarship on sports television, which primarily consists of critical readings of sports newscasts, documentaries, and game broadcasts. Similarly, scholarly analysis of televised punditry largely focuses on political television while ignoring sports punditry. I critically examine how sports punditry's treatment of race and gender both differs from and aligns with the predominantly white sphere of cable news punditry. Tracing sports networks' historical reliance on popular stereotypes in televised performances of female pundits and pundits of color brings

sports punditry into its proper cultural and political contexts, explaining how these stereotypes are connected to contemporary cultural and political issues of their times. This dissertation accomplishes this by bringing together Sport Studies, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, and American Studies scholarship and methodologies to analyze the televised sports pundit's emergence and sustained popularity.

The racial politics of sports television are deeply intertwined with broader conversations about race in American culture and politics. To analyze and historicize how sport punditry operates in a "postracial" framework decades after passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act, I use an interdisciplinary collection of scholarship focusing on race in the post-civil rights era. These works, such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America,* Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States,* and David Theo Goldberg's *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* define the postracial philosophy that dominated discourse in the decades when televised sports punditry emerged. These works are essential to understanding the theoretical and historical frameworks of contemporary racial projects which deny ongoing racial inequalities, such as colorblind racism, postracialism, and racial neoliberalism. I use these works to frame the ways that these philosophies are deployed in televised sport punditry, analyzing how race is performed and discussed by pundits on these programs even when it is not explicitly mentioned. I ground my critical readings in these theoretical frameworks of "colorblind racism" and "racial neoliberalism" not only to position televised sports punditry as part of a broader media ideological apparatus, but also to highlight the contradictions between the genre's greater on-camera minority and female representation and its frequent reproduction of conservative attitudes toward race and gender.

The existing body of literature concerning sport television and race consists primarily of quantitative and qualitative analyses of in-game commentary and news programs, combing these programs for the different codewords used to describe white and Black athletes, as well as male and female athletes and sports. This work bridges histories of stereotyping Blackness in popular culture and sport as a site of larger minority representation. Works by scholars like David J. Leonard demonstrate a link between racially coded language on televised commentary surrounding Black athletes and ongoing stereotypes in popular discourses concerning Black criminality. I extend Leonard's analysis to the specific sphere of televised sports punditry, interpreting ways in which these sport pundit programs uphold elements of white supremacy and patriarchy through their commentary in pursuit of higher ratings and profits.

Feminist theory enriches critical race analyses by explaining how sport and sport media function as male preserves. I put literature critiquing popular culture from feminist perspectives, such as Suzanna Danuta Walters' *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*, into dialogue with feminist sports studies texts, such as Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald's concept of "reading sport," to inform my close readings of sport punditry programs. I treat televised sports punditry as a similar site of identity formation along gender lines, interpreting sport punditry as an apparatus which reinforces the hegemonic concept of sports and sports media as male domains while heavily governing the terms by which women are allowed to participate. Works like Pamela J. Creedon's *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values* use feminist theory to critique male-dominant sports media, and I employ similar critical methodologies to my analysis of televised sports punditry, where women simultaneously break through barriers while meeting overtly sexist resistance from male detractors. I follow in Walters' methodology of treating female pundit shows as "symptomatic" texts, or "…text[s] that

spoke to larger cultural anxieties and issues surrounding women, male violence, and representation."[21] Here, the symptoms assessed are changes to televised sports punditry at a time when greater female representation on pundit programs is occurring across sports, politics, and cable news pundit programs.

I analyze ways in which sport punditry reinforces these traditional gender norms. However, whereas scholars like Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner, and Margaret Carlisle Duncan, et. al. approach the sexist dimensions of sport media television from a quantitative perspective, I approach the topic from a critical industrial perspective, analyzing how these programs operate within the television industry to accumulate both ratings and cultural capital. Additionally, this extends these critiques of limited roles for women in the sport media industry such as sideline reporters to sports punditry on television. This limitation in turn is used to cast doubt on the credibility and knowledge of women in the sports media industry and attempts to invalidate their expertise.[22] This dissertation places punditry into historical conceptions of sexism and gender bias in the sports media industry, specifically into ongoing assumptions of perceived credibility of sportscasters and pundits along gender lines.[23]

This dissertation also examines sports punditry's relationship to race and gender as part of the larger sphere of cable television as a discursive field by relying on scholarship that explores the relationship between race, masculinity, and television. To that end, works such as Amanda D. Lotz's *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century,* Herman Gray's *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness,"* and Christopher P. Campbell's *Race, Myth, and the News* all contextualize and analyze race and masculinity on television. I use these works to historicize the development and popularity of televised sports punditry in more extensive histories of race, masculinity, and television, as these works primarily

focus on news broadcasts and scripted shows. In so doing, I interrogate the way sports television works as an arm of the same ideological apparatus as news and scripted programs to reinforce dominant ideologies of race and gender.

Other works like Kimmel's *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* chronicle the white masculine backlash to various social movements such as the civil rights movement, LGBTQ+ rights, and third wave feminism, analyzing conservative popular media and political pundits and their effectiveness in reaching their white male audiences. I use these sources to identify the role that televised sports punditry plays in establishing, reinforcing, and/or challenging racialized masculinity on television and other similar forms of media. Specifically, I analyze the sources of racialized masculinity and anti-feminist backlash that inspire televised sports pundits, and what contributions these pundits make to ongoing popular conversations about racial and gender stereotypes and expectations. Furthermore, I examine what double standards of presentation exist for female sports pundits, how these obstacles are overcome, and how gender dynamics on these programs reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles seen in televised political news.

Concerning sports television more specifically, Travis Vogan's *ESPN: The Making of a Sport Media Empire* documents the ways in which ESPN used its vast array of resources to acquire cultural capital, brand itself as the definitive sports network, and branch out beyond sports news and broadcasting games to documentaries, original entertainment, and debate/opinion news shows. Works from Jennifer McClearen and Victoria E. Johnson analyzing the framing of specific sports programs such as UFC fights and *Monday Night Football*, respectively, decode how sports media networks use nominally apolitical programming to reinforce dominant ideologies under the guise of increased inclusivity. While these are important

studies investigating the hegemonic work of popular and growing sports programs in maintaining dominant ideologies, none of this research looks specifically at televised sports punditry programs. This dissertation applies the cultural power analysis of these scholars to the specific field of televised sports punditry, adding to a collective critical reading of sports television. It also links the industrial practices of cable television and pundit programs to the cultural and political labor of sports media analyzed by these scholars, thereby delineating the industrial, racial, and gendered politics of televised sports punditry programs.

This dissertation extends these works by analyzing how sports punditry works to both challenge and reinforce these ideologies, in addition to upholding both sports and sports media as male dominant spheres. I argue that the figure of the sports pundit reinforces sports and sports media as male preserves through the nearly monolithically male gender identity seen on major networks and websites and the criticism and harassment faced by female pundits. This dissertation, then, uses the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and feminist theory to examining sports punditry. Additional research on sports media focuses on sport talk radio, which, I contend, serves as a launching point for many of the most important sport pundits currently working in sport television.

Industrially, the emergence of televised sport punditry occurs in the rise of cable television and what Lotz terms the "narrowcasting era," in which increasing specialization and digitization of content has furthered consumer demand for niche programming like sport punditry and commentary. Lotz contends that channels like ESPN were well-equipped to succeed in an era of cable expansion because they "had a built-in brand…organized around a specific type of content."[24] In the case of ESPN, they built their brand and image around being a channel promoting sports and sports news. I place televised sports punditry into part of what

Lotz theories as narrowcasting's "redefinition of television in the course of the multi-channel transition as a medium that supports fragmented audiences and polarized content."[25] I also apply what Henry Jenkins terms convergence culture, or how old media adapts to new technological delivery systems, to the study of sports punditry.[26]

Methodology

This dissertation incorporates media studies, feminist theory, and critical race theory to conduct close critical readings and to chronicle the industrial history of four popular sports punditry programs on cable television from 2001 to the present: ESPN's *Pardon the Interruption* (2001-) and *First Take* (2007-), and Fox Sports 1's *Speak For Yourself* (2016-) and *Garbage Time with Katie Nolan* (2015-17). I use Samantha J. King's observation that "sporting practices, texts, subcultures, institutions, events…are shaped by 'society' and in turn shape 'society'," to inform my critical readings of these programs.[27] Each chapter revolves around carefully selected examples from each program which I located online of each show meant to highlight intersections between race, gender, sports, and popular culture. Following Birrell and McDonald, I "read" these sports punditry programs as a means of "exploring the complex interrelated and fluid character of power relations…" focusing on race, politics, and gender while adding an emphasis on the industrial context of sport media and cable television.[28] This dissertation's chapters explicate how televised sports punditry contributes to understandings of the cultural politics of sports media, specifically in representations of minority and female voices in an overwhelmingly white and male industry. My analyses interrogate how each of these programs creates meaning associated with each show beyond their accuracy or acumen as sports talk

prognosticators. I also explain the purpose that these programs serve within the larger industries of cable television and sports media.

In order to understand how these pundit-driven programs are produced within the industrial context of the sport media industry, I consult industrial publications such as *Variety* and *Sport Business Journal,* in addition to press releases from ESPN and Fox Sports 1. I construct a primary source archive of these programs through a combination of YouTube archives and clips of the shows on network websites, along with reading external interviews of the stars and creators of these shows. This allows me to assess not only how they are received and produced, but also to assess their relationship to cultural and political currents, in addition to the broader politics of the cable television and sports media industries. I also consult quantitative databases like Richard Lapchick's TIDES Racial and Gender Report Cards and Martha M. Lauzen's "Boxed In" project to analyze levels of inequality in sports media and television along racial and gender lines.

The selected examples in each chapter reveal wider changes and contrasts in gender and racial politics on these issues. This dissertation demonstrates that these programs also influence other shows in the genre, providing templates that are both adopted and tweaked by succeeding televised sports punditry programs. Furthermore, the chronological organization of my analysis demonstrates how each program influenced the succeeding programs across media outlets, in addition to informing programs seeking to forge their own unique niche.

The subjects of each show's commentaries also change throughout the dissertation. They begin with primarily on-field debates and discussions in ESPN's *Pardon The Interruption (PTI)* and *First Take,* using athletes like LeBron James and Tim Tebow to stand in for discourses on Blackness, whiteness, and masculinity. They then continue to discussions on Fox Sports 1's

Speak For Yourself and *Garbage Time,* taking up issues of athlete behavior and political consciousness ranging from conversations about domestic violence to ongoing cultural debates about NFL players' protests against police brutality during the National Anthem and anti-Trump political activity, beginning in the Fall of 2016. I chose to analyze these specific controversies because they center questions of racial and gendered identity in American culture. Analyzing these programs not only reflects social and political changes, but also changes in the sport television industry, as punditry underwent changes in distribution, branching out from television onto the Internet and social media. I chart how the hegemonically negotiated concepts of racial and gender identity change over time, as American culture from 2001 (the year of *PTI's* debut) to the present saw numerous battles to reconstruct and/or preserve racial and gender identities. I examine how these cultural and political currents influenced the discourse of sports pundits, how sports pundits entered into these conversations.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter one chronicles the history of sports punditry on television up to the launching of *Pardon the Interruption* in 2001. I argue that the continued success of punditry across television represents both industrial and cultural convergence beginning in the 1980s from radio and print to television. In politics as well as sports, television's turn to punditry took cues from firebrand talk radio hosts and opinion columnists for major newspapers and magazines. The popularity and commercial success of pundits' outrage discourse created an industrial space that led to ESPN's adoption of the genre. As a response, the network turned to opinion columnists from major newspapers and radio hosts to star in their pundit-driven programming, mimicking non-sports

news and political discussion and debate programs such as *Firing Line* (1966-1999, 2018-), *The McLaughlin Group* (1982-), *Hannity and Colmes* (1996-2009), and *Crossfire* (1982-2005, 2013-2014) with offerings like *The Sports Reporters* (1988-2017).

While televised sports punditry shared many similarities with political punditry on cable news channels in terms of reliance on outrage discourse and visual style, the genre also featured greater minority representation in its presentation of pundits. In addition to former athletes turned pundits, Black *SportsCenter* personalities such as Stuart Scott created what I term "proto-pundit" personas on-air that made not just the highlights, but also their own performances on *SportsCenter*, into entertaining television. White anchors/proto-pundits like Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick also contributed to the "infotainment" aspect of ESPN's news branding. This reinforced sport as a site of minority overrepresentation in popular culture. I argue that the employment of minority pundits on sport television challenged the presumed whiteness of the pundit figure while simultaneously relying on popular stereotypes of Black masculinity in its presentation of the same minority pundits.

Chapter 2 covers ESPN's *Pardon the Interruption*, or *PTI*, first launched in October 2001. *PTI* pairs veteran Washington D.C.-based sportswriters Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser across a debate desk in an attempt to recreate their frequent arguments in the *Washington Post* newsroom while debating issues in sports, often with a humorous and lighthearted tone. Even with this tone in place, *PTI* also reproduced competing ideas of both racial tension and a sense of postracialism, largely framing racism as an individual, rather than systemic, issue. I argue that *PTI*, which featured one white man (Kornheiser) and one Black man (Wilbon) arguing about contemporary sports issues laid out on a "rundown" of topics as a clock timed their arguments, proved to be exceptionally successful and led to the development of more

deliberately confrontational programs with similar interracial male pairings. Industrially, *PTI* effectively illustrates a symbiosis between sports news networks and cable news networks, with *PTI* borrowing elements from programs such as *Crossfire* and *Hannity and Colmes* while also diverging from these programs in other stylistic ways, such as featuring a rundown and a self-deprecating "errors and omissions" segment.

I argue that the emergence and sustained popularity of *PTI* reflects elements of postracialism and a preference for visual diversity espoused throughout politics and popular culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. *PTI* highlights these ideologies by centering its program on an interracial male duo noted not just for their strong opinions as columnists, but also for their long-tenured friendship and self-effacing styles, seemingly undercutting the seriousness of their televised disputes. Through featuring a multiracial pairing while rarely discussing matters of systemic racism in sport or culture, *PTI* subtly reinforced the neoliberal concept of a postracial America, hoping to draw in minority viewers while also not alienating the white male demographics sought by the network's advertising partners.

While ESPN had hired many sports pundits prior to 2012, Chapter 3 focuses on its most successful program driven by sports pundits, *First Take* (2007-). In 2012, widely reviled polemicist Skip Bayless, a white veteran sports columnist, was paired on the show with Stephen A. Smith, a slightly younger Black reporter and radio host who carried a similar reputation for antagonism. From 2012-2016, *First Take* used this duo to package and court implicit racial tension between the two panelists by having the two men engage in heated debates about current issues in sports, often along racial lines. *First Take's* shift in format from a general morning show to permanent debates between Bayless and Smith occurred during a time of increased racial tension in the Obama era, with white conservatism lashing out against the Obama

Administration, greater minority visibility, and an imagined threat to whiteness. This program capitalized on racial and cultural tensions in 2010s America by further extending the prevalence of outrage discourse in sports punditry to reflect rising cultural and political tensions represented by competing partisan movements such as the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. Eschewing the friendly and jovial debates of *PTI, First Take* instead echoed the style of *The McLaughlin Group*.

Chapter 3 centers on *First Take's* treatment of two popular athletes: LeBron James and Tim Tebow. I am selecting the shows' commentary on these two athletes as relevant examples for several reasons. First, they both occupied a large percentage of show topics in the early days of the Bayless/Smith pairing. Second, James and Tebow both stand in for popular discourses on Blackness and whiteness, respectively. Third, Bayless' effusive praise for Tebow and his often-scathing criticism of James are full of racially coded language similar to news commentaries critical of contemporary Black masculinity on cable news. Conversely, Smith's defense of James and excoriations of Tebow act as a foil to Bayless' racially coded invective, countering Bayless's performances of white grievance while enacting elements of stereotypical Black male rage. This chapter places *First Take's* debates on James and Tebow in the context of important cultural, historical, and industrial shifts that occurred in and around 2012. Culturally, 2012 also saw shifts in public discourse regarding race in response to events such as the power gains of the Tea Party movement, the reelection of Barack Obama, and the murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. As *First Take* was gaining popularity during this timeframe, pundits on other cable news channels including Glenn Beck, Keith Olbermann, Bill O'Reilly, and Sean Hannity regularly used their programs to opine on race relations and racial tensions in the Obama era.

Following the popularity of *PTI* and *First Take,* Chapter 4 traces the influences of ESPN's pundit-driven programming model on upstart challenger network Fox Sports 1. An

extension of Rupert Murdoch's global NewsCorp Empire, Fox Sports 1 (FS1) emerged in 2013 as a potential rival to ESPN. To this end, FS1 hired former *First Take* producer and ESPN executive Jamie Horowitz to develop original programming for the network. Horowitz hired several pundits from his time at ESPN to star on opinion-driven programming to compensate for the network's miniscule broadcast rights in comparison to ESPN, including Skip Bayless, Jason Whitlock, and Colin Cowherd. By 2016, FS1 featured three programs copying the basic feel and format of *First Take*. The adoption of this tactic as a seemingly channel-wide identity by FS1 speaks to not only the format and genre's popularity, but to ongoing racial tensions present across the television and media landscape that had increased since the launch of the classic *First Take* lineup started in 2012. It also crystalized NewsCorp's penchant for provocation and conservative polemical commentary as a means to increase ratings.

This chapter focuses on Jason Whitlock and Colin Cowherd's program *Speak for Yourself* (2016-). Compared to *First Take*, *Speak for Yourself* added more explicit political tension, as Whitlock brought to the program a history of being an outspoken Black conservative, and his white debate partner Cowherd took more liberal positions in these debates. I argue that FS1 featured Whitlock as a Black conservative voice to discredit politically active Black athletes while defending the racial status quo. This chapter centers on how *Speak for Yourself* treated the issue of NFL Players' protests opposing police brutality during the National Anthem, and Colin Kaepernick in particular, in addition to increased anti-Trump political activity from LeBron James. Coverage of the protests extended beyond sports media and into political media, as reactionary conservative responses to the protests ranging from right-wing media to the White House became central talking points on Fox News and other media outlets, obscuring the protests' original focus on police brutality.

Chapter 5 remains at FS1, centering on Katie Nolan's program *Garbage Time with Katie Nolan* (2015-2017). As previously explained, televised punditry historically has been fashioned as a domain of white masculinity. Sports and sports media have similarly exclusionary histories, and these elements of exclusion are still present when looking at current demographic data of sports media members. While invisible barriers to increased diversity along racial and gender lines still exist, the increasing visibility of female pundits at major sport networks complicates longstanding gendered expectations of their roles in the industry. Linda Cohn, for example, had anchored *SportsCenter* as early as 1992, in addition to hosting other studio programs.[29] Other women at ESPN such as Jemele Hill began to host regular commentary shows like Hill and Michael Smith's program *His & Hers* in 2013.[30] This chapter analyzes Katie Nolan's FS1 program *Garbage Time* (2015-2017) to highlight the gendered politics of televised sports punditry. Debuting one year before *Speak for Yourself* and *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed, Garbage Time* gained popularity not just for Nolan's humorous takes on contemporary sports news, but also for several pointed commentaries she produced on ingrained sexism in sports and sports media. The reaction her commentaries received, both positive and negative, represents to the ongoing struggle for female representation in sports media.

I argue that Nolan's success represents a new role for women in the industry—that of the "cool sports girl," someone who appeals to hegemonic standards of femininity and beauty while also demonstrating sports knowledge and humor on par or exceeding her male peers. This new industry figure, I contend, allows women greater agency but also fuels notions of promoting postfeminist ideology among women in exchange for greater access to a male-dominated industry, reflecting a gendered version of the postracial politics shaping *PTI* in Chapter 2. However, the online backlash that female pundits like Nolan receive in spite of their ability to

emulate some characteristics of their masculine peers demonstrates the limits to this newfound agency by women in the industry.

The conclusion returns to ESPN, examining how ESPN responded to the success of FS1's turn to punditry as a channel-wide identity. It conducts a brief analysis of a double standard at ESPN concerning race and gender that became more pronounced in the era of Trump, focusing on overlapping events in the fall of 2017. Specifically, I contrast ESPN's suspension of Jemele Hill and the network's brief partnership with Barstool Sports. ESPN disciplined Hill for tweets calling for the boycott of NFL sponsors, many of whom also sponsored ESPN. Simultaneously, ESPN eventually cancelled *Van Talk*, their program with Barstool, after one episode due to criticism from female ESPN employees like Sam Ponder. These examples represent how ESPN responds to both internal and external pressures on racial and gender issues. Hill's previous tweets denouncing Trump as a white supremacist put the company in the crosshairs of numerous conservative critics, including the Trump White House. ESPN's handling of the situation reiterated the primacy of corporate sponsorship over pundits' opinions. Conversely, ESPN's eventual decision to sever ties with Barstool came after internal pressure from women at the network . In promoting other female voices at the network while disciplining a politically Black voice in Hill, ESPN demonstrated its commitment to privileging whiteness. These incidents also indicate that, years after their association with Limbaugh, ESPN still attempts to attract controversy with its pundits and personalities while simultaneously shielding itself from any negative consequences of these personalities.

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CHAPTER 1

FROM THE *TRIBUNE* TO THE TUBE: SPORT MEDIA PUNDITRY AND ITS TRANSITION TO TELEVISION

> The business is entertainment…Anything that's going to make an all-sports station work has to be an entertainment show. Even if you're doing all-news, you're in an entertainment medium.
>
> -*Nanci Donnellan*[1]

Introduction

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, competing political factions carved out niche spaces across television and radio. In contrast to the emergence of rancorous political debate programs on cable and broadcast television, sports and sports media were often viewed as escapes from these overtly partisan frames.[2] This popular notion embodies what Jay Coakley terms the "great sport myth," in which sports represent an apolitical meritocracy free of outside or corrupting influences.[3] But televised sports punditry overlaps significantly with the conventions and practices of political punditry. In sports as well as politics, cable television's promotion of punditry took cues from opinion columnists for major newspapers, magazines, and polemical talk radio hosts who frequently relied on hypermasculinity and outrage discourse to grow their brands. Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey M. Berry characterize outrage discourse as "not so much discussion as…verbal competition," or "political theater with a scorecard."[4] This rhetorical framework of outrage discourse in political talk shows and talk radio translated well to the combative space of sports talk radio and news columns and, as this chapter will detail, televised sports punditry.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how early sports punditry programs on cable television, such as ESPN's *The Sports Reporters*, followed in the footsteps of televised political punditry by adopting both the style and the personnel of opinion columns in major newspapers and sports

talk radio hosts. I then contend that, beginning in the 1990s, ESPN's flagship news and highlight program *SportsCenter* and ESPN2's *SportsNight* became centers for "infotainment," merging more traditional news reporting of television and print journalism with popular culture references and distinctive personalities delivering commentary in order to expand the network's audience and profitability. I also claim that even as these programs employed greater on-air racial and gender diversity than political punditry, they did so in part through reproducing stereotypical images of Blackness and women in sports media. This reliance on stereotypical imagery, coupled with a lack of racial and gender diversity in positions of power at the network, privileged the white masculinity prevalent in both sportswriting and sports talk radio shows.

I begin by conducting a brief review of literature concerning contemporary political punditry on television and the genre's shift from focusing on journalistic objectivity and accuracy to placing greater emphasis on punditry, commentary, and profitability in the 1980s and 1990s. I situate the rise of political news channels like Fox News and MSNBC within a larger body of scholarly literature chronicling the industrial shift to what Amanda D. Lotz terms the "narrowcasting" era of cable, in which channels sought to capture specific niche audiences and demographics rather than the wider appeal of broadcast channels.[5] I then detail the concurrent rise of televised sports pundits in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, tracing their evolution from sports columns and radio stations to places of prominence on cable networks such as ESPN.

I conduct a critical industrial history of early sports television programs featuring pundits like ESPN's *The Sports Reporters*, ESPN's *SportsCenter*, and ESPN2's *SportsNight*—examining and analyzing the industrial and cultural contexts of each program. I argue that these programs' emphasis of moving anchors from straightforward deliverers of news to personalities created a demand for sports programs on ESPN devoted entirely to pundit commentary and debates. More

specifically, I posit that by blending cultural references into these newscasts, ESPN treated its flagship news programs as "infotainment" built around what I term "proto-pundit" personalities like Keith Olbermann, Dan Patrick, Suzy Kolber, and Stuart Scott. I also argue that developing "proto-pundits" was part of a strategy to broaden ESPN's audience beyond the more concentrated market of sports fans, and, by using some women and anchors of color, to capture viewers for *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight* outside the assumed white male demographic.

Contextualizing Contemporary Political Punditry on American Cable Television

A wide body of scholastic literature details the history, development, and social impact of political punditry. Lynn Letukas defines "pundit" as "the only term consistently used to describe someone who gives his or her opinion to the public," a term that often subsumes other titles and responsibilities, such as commentator, columnist, analyst, and editorialist.[6] Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs note that pundits were historically seen as keepers of "special knowledge" unavailable to common people, but that the modern meaning of "pundit" now refers to "one who gives opinions in an authoritative manner."[7] More broadly, Eric Alterman classifies pundits as "the people anointed by the media to give their opinions on things."[8]

Political punditry on American television has several notable predecessors in radio, ranging from the antisemitic and fascist rantings of Father Charles Coughlin to the erudite broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow, the latter of whom transitioned his blend of newscasting and commentaries successfully to television. Media critic Walter Lippman envisioned that ideally, pundits should strive to find out "what is going on under the surface and beyond the horizon; to infer, to deduce, to imagine and to guess what is going on inside." Lippman also suggested that

"political punditry [should] do 'what every sovereign citizen is supposed to do but has not the time or the interest to do for himself.'"[9] Following radio news and punditry, early television pundit programs such as Murrow's *See it Now* blended commentary on topical issues from Murrow with traditional "hard" news subjects and reporting.[10]

A prime example of televised punditry occurred with ABC's Buckley-Vidal debates coinciding with the 1968 Democratic and Republican national conventions. The heated and contentious exchanges between the opposing conservative and liberal pundits sparked high television ratings and offered a glimpse into the future of televised political punditry. Later programs, such as *Agronsky & Company*, *Washington Week in Review*, Buckley's *Firing Line*, and *The McLaughlin Group* demonstrated broadcast television's willingness to promote pundits on television debating issues, furthering the popular notion that outrage discourse was a successful formula for televised entertainment. However, the time slots and availability of these programs suggested that while they may have been popular, they were still considered undesirable for prime time by their networks. For instance, *Agronsky & Company* (1976-1987) aired in syndication on Saturday nights on PBS, *The McLaughlin Group* (1982-2016, 2018-) aired on Sunday mornings on PBS, *Firing Line* (1966-199, 2018-) aired on PBS, and *Washington Week in Review* (1967-) aired on PBS on Sunday mornings. Even while punditry was relegated to public television, the format of these shows and their pundits accrued popularity with viewers and would come to find greater space and visibility on the burgeoning cable news scene.

Swept up in the Reagan Revolution and a growing conservative backlash to the sweeping sociocultural changes of the 1960s, both broadcast and cable television networks turned to insiders from the Reagan Administration as regular contributors on their programs, featuring conservative partisan contributors like George F. Will and eventual presidential candidate Pat

Buchanan. The wider availability of cable and subsequent transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting encouraged pundit-driven programming to give partisan perspectives on current political events to capture segments of an increasingly fragmented audience. Megan Gwynne Mullen writes that CNN in particular turned to talk show formats, which, Mullen notes, were "relatively inexpensive," in order to "complement newscasts and add variety to the schedule."[11]

In the 1980s and beyond, "soft news" and true crime stories became larger draws for viewers than traditional "hard news" like political debates and policies. When political issues were covered on television, as Charles L. Ponce De Leon notes, "the networks developed a new style of reporting that treated politics as if it were a game: a never-ending campaign in which particular policies were assessed in terms of their potential impact on reelection chances and partisan advantage."[12] This game-like presentation of political coverage demonstrates an overlap between political television and sports television, as the popularity of sports on television bled over to an increasingly partisan and divisive political landscape. Specifically, in a matter akin to fanatics of sports teams and athletes, both newscasters and viewers seemed more concerned with who won or lost a debate or issue rather than the merits of a particular policy or position. Ponce De Leon writes that cable news networks' decision to focus on events with clear winners and losers, such as political campaigns, turned politics "into a spectator sport."[13] Political journalist Jack Shafer summarized the contemporary connection between sports news and political news:

> The jobs of political reporters and sports writers are almost identical: Determine who is ahead and who is behind; get inside the heads of the participants; decode the relevant strategies and tactics; and find a way to convert reader interest into sustainable enthusiasm. Then, maintain reader enthusiasm for the months and months of caucuses or preseason games, primaries or regular season games, conventions or playoffs, and the general election or Super Bowl (or World Series).[14]

The proliferation of cable and satellite television channels also ushered in the beginning of what Amanda D. Lotz terms the "narrowcasting era."[15] Contrasting with the wide-ranging appeal sought by major broadcast networks with their programming, in the narrowcasting era, the success of a political news channel was measured by how much of a desired audience segment a program captured. Lotz suggests that in an era of "increasing fractionalization of the audience among shows, channels and distribution devices…television can still function as a mass medium," but that "in most cases it does so by aggregating a collection of niche audiences."[16] Using this practice, even as more viewing options emerged, television used its new plethora of options to cater to an increasingly polarized society. Unlike some of the more specific niche programming channels on cable, ESPN sought a large demographic that cut across racial, political, and age groups—sports fans. While sports programming and news were not universal, ESPN's multi-demographic appeal allowed the network to command high subscriber fees to its cable providers and become successful.[17]

Industrially, the rise of twenty-four-hour cable news channels such as CNN (1980-) created a space for punditry to flourish on cable television, supplementing breaking news broadcasts. CNN created popular programs such as *Crossfire* (1982-2005) and *Capital Gang* (1981-2005)—aptly described in 1995 by the *American Journalism Review* as "shout shows"—to fill this newly expanded twenty-four-hour programming block.[18] In order to be on these "shout shows," according to Media Research Center executive director Brent Baker, pundits "have to be provocative." Baker cautioned, "If you're boring and dull and give out facts, you won't be invited back."[19] These programs disregarded nuance and consensus in favor of partisan confrontation and a gladiatorial tone between pundits. As an example, Jacobs and Townsley describe *Crossfire* as a program "designed to emphasize the difference between conservative and

liberal positions," arguing that this strategy "reinforced an interpretive framework in which any issue could be neatly divided into two clear and opposing positions…pitting Republican Party principles against Democratic ones."[20] These trends in political television journalism embodied a polarization-for-profit model, with access to politicians and levels of outrage discourse becoming valuable commodities to these programs.

Tracing this rhetoric, Pierre Bourdieu lamented the decline of serious discussions on European television news by noting that on-air pundits and panelists "must present their positions in uncomplicated, clear, and striking terms" and "above all…must avoid the quagmire of intellectual complexity."[21] He continued to explain that television news opts "for confrontations over debates" and prefers "polemics over rigorous arguments," while also preferring to "confront individuals…instead of confronting their arguments."[22] This movement represents a shift in tone from the presumed objectivity of earlier commentators like Lippman and Murrow, with access to politicians and levels of outrage discourse mattering more than knowledge of policies or subjects. James T. Hamilton attributes this decline in the seriousness of punditry programming to the reality that modern newspapers and television channels are "part of large publicly traded firms," and contends that consequently, "the focus on profits demanded by shareholders means less attention to public affairs reporting."[23] Journalist Howard Kurtz echoed these sentiments, bemoaning the fact that on these shows, "outlandish opinion-mongers on the left and right tend to drown out everything else." Kurtz surmised that networks determined that "extremism in the pursuit of ratings is no vice," a trend he described as "a driving force behind the shrill and often mean-spirited politics of the 1990s."[24] Josef Joffe writes that the modern media landscape leaves the public "caught off balance between the pap and soundbites of television and the enamel-breaking fare of academia," and, consequently, that this dichotomy

leaves "even the intelligent and educated…only too happy to gorge on the finger food laid out on the pundit's buffet."[25] This comment suggests that the commentary provided by television pundits, rather than living up to Lippman's earlier-stated ideals of the role, contributed to an oversimplification and overall polarization of popular political discussions, while also proving adaptable to other genres of television.

Corroborating the negative effects of this trend, a 1999 survey of journalists in the *Columbia Journalism Review* found that only 15% of those surveyed felt that journalists doubling as television commentators or pundits improved journalism as a whole. Conversely, 59% of those surveyed said it made journalism worse because it leads to media members "influencing events and public policy rather than just reporting them."[26] Several respondents also bemoaned the blurring of lines between news and opinion in the industry, noting the potential damage to their credibility as journalists. Others noted that the visibility and recognition provided by television appearances was a way to grow the brand of both newspapers and individual journalists.[27] The tension within the industry between traditional print and television journalism demonstrates a cultural and economic shift concerning expectations of objectivity and professionalism, shifts which impacted both political news and sports media.

These early political pundit shows also drew heavily from political talk radio programs. Spurred on by the Reagan administration and the Federal Communication Commission's decision not to enforce the fairness doctrine in the mid-1980s, conservative opinion shows, now free from federal requirements to balance liberal and conservative perspectives, exploded across AM radio stations throughout the United States. These hosts and programs largely focus on the fanaticism of hosts and callers without often delving into the finer points of the discussion taking place. Ian Hutchby argues that talk radio fosters interactions that are "principally designed to

discuss personal opinions about public issues," and these programs serve as "a space created at the interface of private and public spheres of modern society."[28] This spirit of public and private confrontation between hosts and callers represented not just the profitability of conflict-centric media, but also allowed a sense of conservative populism to permeate between these hosts' rants and callers' anti-establishment rage.

As part of an overwhelmingly white and male industry, talk radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage embodied the white, male, conservative backlash against federal government activity and also civil rights, third-wave feminism, and the gay rights movements. The success of political pundits in this time period also spoke to their ability to capitalize on this polarization and tension through their deployment of outrage discourse and coded language. The rise of the "angry white male" archetype in the 1990s carried over elements of Nixon's "silent majority" and Reagan's appeal to voters using similarly racially coded messaging in the 1980s. Talk radio served as a reinforcement of conservative masculinity and as a white male retaliation against gains made by third wave feminism, particularly concerning Title IX and increased female participation in sports.

The comparisons between sporting competitions and aggressive, male-dominated political punditry were not solely limited to talk radio. Alan Hirsch lamented the tendency of shows like *The McLaughlin Group* to rely on "locker room machismo," claiming that women who participated in these culturally marked male spaces were often "stigmatized as 'screechy' and 'strident'" by their detractors.[29] Hirsch also notes that these pundit-centric shows shared common elements with professional wrestling, in which the often male participants thrive on "the same bizarre juxtaposition of violence and buffoonery: blustery denunciations of the enemy and ostensibly vicious combat shown in absurd theatrical excess."[30] This metaphorical

connection between sports and political television is seen through the continuing use of boxing-type graphics on political shows, fast-scrolling news tickers mimicking incoming sports scores typically found on ESPN, and the cheerleader-like behavior of various partisan contributors hailing specific candidates and policies while denigrating their political rivals.

Nimmo and Combs divide this genre of talk and debate shows into three separate categories: "casual chatter, confrontational chatter, and carnival chatter."[31] On talk shows featuring what they term "casual chatter," subjects often varied from one segment to the next, and a "genteel veneer" is expected of both guest and host.[32] This format and level of discourse was easily replicated on political interview shows such as *Meet the Press* and *Face the Nation.* "Confrontational chatter," they explain, embodied itself in aforementioned programs such as *The McLaughlin Group* and *Firing Line,* where guests were viewed as "means to an end" and as "props in entertainment programming as much as information sources."[33] In shows like these, confrontation between hosts and guests led to good ratings shares, overshadowing meaningful discussions championed earlier by Lippmann. Finally, "carnival chatter" deliberately straddles a wide range of topics, meant to draw in wide audiences while simultaneously being referred to as tabloid journalism and discredited in comparison to more traditional news programs. Confrontational and carnival chatter shows traded heavily on outrage discourse, which explains their popularity in comparison with the more traditional casual chatter news shows.

It was in this era of confrontational media that global media mogul Rupert Murdoch enlisted former Richard Nixon campaign adviser Roger Ailes to launch Fox News Channel in 1996. Lotz charges that the explosion in the number of cable channels required successful channels to "develop an identity…or brand" in order to "stand out among the growing abundance of competitors."[34] Fox News made a commitment to bringing in loyal fans of conservative talk

radio and attempted to turn them into Fox News viewers, as evidenced by the network's recruitment of Sean Hannity to host a debate show despite the fact that he was a talk radio host with no prior television experience.[35] This practice of developing original and distinct programming, which Fox News accomplished with its array of pundit shows, is a key branding practice for cable channels from its rivals, according to Mullen.[36] Ailes himself outlined Fox News' strategy of conservative-focused audience segmentation, claiming that "'somewhere between 56 and 82 percent of American people think news is biased, negative and boring…so let's take 60 percent as the number—it looks like a marketing niche to me.'"[37] By the early 2000s, Fox News had surpassed CNN in viewership, creating stars out of conservative pundits like Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and, later, Glenn Beck.

Lotz contends that the success of talk shows, including those featuring political pundits, "precisely reproduced their channels' brands and cultivated regular viewing that was of critical value when the channels' owners renegotiated carriage deals and fees with service providers."[38] Here, the brand of Fox News was developed on the backs of conservative pundits bringing "fair and balanced" commentary to enhance the network's self-styled image as a bastion of conservatism in a news landscape overrun by liberal bias. The prominence of Fox News' punditry was punctuated by their aggressive attacks on Bill Clinton during his impeachment, as well as their combative support for the George W. Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Jacobs and Townley demonstrate that these tendencies intensified after September 11, 2001, especially among conservative media, where networks "openly abandoned traditional journalistic stances of detachment and neutrality," which were gradually replaced by "refined and purified...partisan positions."[39]

Countering Fox News, rival cable network MSNBC debuted in 1996 to slow initial ratings. MSNBC launched under a philosophy described by network President Phil Griffin as an attempt to "'Go be CNN, but do it better.'"[40] Beginning in 2001, MSNBC imitated Fox News' format of emphasizing opinion over breaking news stories, rebranding itself as "America's news channel" after the 9/11 attacks and featuring pundits ranging from conservatives like Alan Keyes and Pat Buchanan to the more liberal Phil Donahue to capture audience shares.[41] After a rapid decline in viewership—ratings fell 23% in 2002, the first year of this format switch—MSNBC began promoting shows starring liberal pundits like Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews, and former ESPN anchor Keith Olbermann, aiming to attract liberal viewers looking for an alternative to Fox News. MSNBC's ideological and tonal shifts in the mid-to-late 2000s also capitalized on growing Anti-George W. Bush sentiments building due to the ongoing War in Iraq and the Administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, effectively replicating the Fox playbook, but with a leftward ideological tilt. This practice significantly increased the channel's ratings in subsequent election cycles.[42]

Furthermore, these connections between sports punditry and political punditry on cable television were forged during a time of increasing conglomeration in the media industry. This push toward media mega-conglomeration was spurred by the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which relaxed ownership limits, thereby helping to "create some of the largest mergers of media corporations in U.S. History."[43] In terms of sports television, ESPN and ABC Sports fell under the Disney umbrella beginning in 1996, Fox Sports was the property of NewsCorp, and CNN/Sports Illustrated (SI) was owned by Time Warner, reflecting the consolidation of media power in the hands of a few companies and individuals. ESPN continued this conglomeration at local levels by buying up numerous radio stations at the beginning of the

1990s, expanding its reach beyond television and the internet to terrestrial radio broadcasts and forging relationships with radio pundits.[44] This was furthered in later years by ESPN Radio buying radio stations across the country, in addition to developing local online hubs such as "ESPN Dallas" or "ESPN New York" for larger media markets, introducing local radio and print personalities to national audiences. This type of synergy blended local markets with national stories, and also expanded ESPN's print and radio pundits into different regional markets.

In addition to significant industrial changes, the rise of pundit-centric programs on television occurred alongside significant racial and gender controversies and inequalities happening in American society. For example, CNN often divided pundits along racial lines when discussing issues such as the 1991 assault of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department officers or the 1995 O.J. Simpson murder trial. CNN's televised debates of these events signified the popularity of staging racial tension on pundit-driven news programs. Douglas Kellner contends that the OJ Simpson trial marked "a shift in TV news from journalism to infotainment," while it simultaneously demonstrated "…how society is split around the axes of gender, race, and class."[45] Additionally, during this timeframe, both the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations appointed several people of color and women in high-profile positions, including Clarence Thomas, Madeleine Albright, Ron Brown, and Henry Cisneros, representing a nominal diversification of political power. Concurrently, several entertainers and businesspeople of color such as Bill Cosby, Michael Jordan, and Oprah Winfrey, found dynamic success with both Black and white audiences. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains that these individual success stories were frequently deployed by moderate and conservative voices to "propound a happy version of the American story," with "the elevation of…minority politicians" (and entertainers) serving "as evidence that America has overcome" racism.[46] While minority pundits appeared on television

news more during this time than they had in decades previously, the appearances afforded in the wake of the Simpson and King verdicts often painted Black America as having a singular unified opinion on these matters, an opinion which was often staged to conflict with white voices on these programs to boost racial tension and, therefore, television ratings.

The continued success of punditry on television represents an ongoing trend of cultural polarization, originally stemming from the wide-ranging social changes of the 1960s, then further popularized by Limbaugh and other (mainly white male) radio hosts' regular anti-liberal rants in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Historical events in this time period shaping this white male anti-government backlash rhetoric included the standoff between David Koresh and the ATF in 1993, Timothy McVeigh's bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, and the 1994 reclaiming of the house by Republicans, highlighted by Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America". Limbaugh in particular was singled out for praise by Republican politicians and was even made an honorary freshman member of the congress of 1994, demonstrating the influence that firebrand political pundits held in both the media and political spheres.[47]

From Columns to Cable: Adapting Sports Punditry to Television with *The Sports Reporters*

Like political media, sports media had its own class of pundits, or "keepers of special knowledge," that predated the rise of television talk shows, and sports television more generally. Prior to television, popular sports commentary occurred primarily through print columns and, later, on radio airwaves. Writers such as Grantland Rice elevated the sports column to a place of cultural prestige, penning newspaper columns that applied commentary and poetic license to descriptions of significant sporting events.[48] Rice's columns covering sporting events were

syndicated nationally by 1914, and his salary as a columnist greatly exceeded the typical salaries of newspaper reporters, demonstrating the popularity and profitability of sports commentary.[49] Historically, sports columnists were, according to sportswriter John Schulian, "the rock on which the sports page was built…for most of the 20th century."[50] Adding to this, Raymond Boyle notes that "from the outset, sportswriters in the US were differentiated from mere sports reporters or journalists by their ability, and license, to place themselves at the center of the story, rather than merely report the facts and figures associated with a sporting contest."[51]

Early 20th century sports columns largely upheld hegemonically constructed values of individualism, determination, and triumph against long odds, endowing athletes such as Babe Ruth and Red Grange with mythical auras and qualities associated with American exceptionalism. These "traditional American" values praised by early sports columnists reflected conventions of hegemonic white masculinity, echoing Theodore Roosevelt's embrace of sports as a developer of white Christian and American virtues.[52] Supporting this notion, Bruce J. Evensen chronicles how early 20th Century sportswriters engaged in a "struggle over tall-tale telling in the nation's sports pages…" that "…reflected journalism's uncertain complexity in the manufacture of celebrity in an era of personal publicity."[53] Sportswriting was part of an overarching structure in early mass media that mirrored a battle of hegemonic position to determine which American values would be upheld and amplified through popular media.

Sports sections of newspapers sold well, with Evensen noting that publishing stories about famed boxer Jack Dempsey "meant a 50 percent leap in readership the weeks before and in the days following his title defenses."[54] Sports sections ability to sell occurred in spite of the genre's negative reputation among journalists as "the toy department of news media" in comparison to news stories focusing on politics.[55] This reputation of sports journalism as a "toy

department" contributed to a diminished concern for policing bias, equity, and diversity in the industry, especially in contrast to the numerous watchdog groups that surveil political media advocating for fairness and accuracy. Evensen also argues that sports pages carried important cultural implications for newspapers, arguing that the sports page "offered solace and excitement and a form of reassurance to readers whose workweeks were increasingly characterized by the cheerlessness of service as corporate cogs."[56] Evensen's analysis reiterates the previously stated outlook of sports and sports media as an escape of sorts for readers from business and political concerns. David Rowe writes about the existence of an ironic gap between "the economic power of the sports department" and "its cultural power (low professional reputation and esteem.)"[57]

As radio emerged as a viable conduit for entertainment and news programming, sporting events such as boxing matches and baseball games were aired live over the radio. Ronald A. Smith writes that "radio and television, as commercial entities, created symbiotic relationships with intercollegiate athletics nearly from their beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s."[58] This relationship of seeing live sporting events as a profitable and reliable programming block symbolized that sport content would be a popular draw for readers, listeners and, later, viewers of sport media. The auditory nature of the medium necessitated the talent of loquacious broadcasters who, like their peers in print, transformed sporting events into epic spectacles for their listeners. These broadcasts also ascribed many of the same hegemonic values of whiteness and masculinity to athletes, teams, and coaches that appeared in newspaper columns and recaps.

Turning to television, early sports programming in the network era consisted of broadcasting live games and occasional recap programs. Sports-themed variety shows, such as *The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports*, which moved from radio to television in 1946 and ran until 1960, mixed event coverage with occasional commentaries and topical features from the world

of sports. Other programs, such as ABC's *Wide World of Sports* beginning in 1961, used host Jim McKay to cover seldom-discussed sports, crafting human interest narratives as a means of compensating for ABC's lack of live major sports. While these programs were not explicitly pundit-driven, their emphasis on commentary and presentation signaled a future path merging serious sports coverage with entertainment and cultural capital.

Travis Vogan writes that ABC Sports' usage of Howard Cosell across numerous programs in the 1960s as an authoritative voice mixing interviews with commentary and opinion laid the groundwork for modern televised sports punditry. Specifically, Vogan posits that Cosell's presence in part allowed ABC to "grow salable personalities and promote big events."[59] Cosell's interviews and televised defense of Muhammad Ali and, later, Cosell's charged commentary in defense of Black athletes' protests at the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympics, linked sports, current events, and racial politics more directly than televised predecessors.[60] Cosell's previous experience hosting radio programs on ABC in the 1950s, which he described as a "'combination of 'Juvenile Jury' and 'Meet the Press,'" shaped his approach to delivering commentary on sports television.[61] Indeed, Cosell's long-running ABC Radio program, *Speaking of Sports* (1956-1992), represented, in the words of Cosell, "'the first time they [listeners] have ever gotten personal, incisive actualities on the radio in sports,'" while also breaking through what he termed the "jockocracy" of retired athletes, who made up a majority of sports commentators.[62] Cosell also offered commentary and interviews on ABC programs such as *Monday Night Football,* and *Saturday Night Live with Howard Cosell,* extending the idea that pundit shows could supplement live coverage of major sports. Cosell's commentaries paved the road for punditry on sports television independent of live event broadcasts.

The first twenty-four-hour all-sports cable network, ESPN (the Entertainment Sports Programming Network), launched in 1979, initially lacking broadcast rights to any major North American sports. A 15th anniversary profile in *The Chicago Tribune* described ESPN as "a working mix of live event coverage, serious journalism, irreverent commentary, frat-house gags, trivia, nostalgia and a never-ending stream of highlights."[63] ESPN's success mixing news and live events with an entertaining style provided an important model that both drew elements from and influenced many cable news programs. ESPN had been running sports news information daily on the bottom of the screen without interruption since at least 1995 in a feature dubbed the "ESPN Bottom Line," perhaps in a nod to the financial stock scrolling of CNN's Headline News network.[64] For example, cable news began to permanently include a ticker at the bottom of the screen to deliver breaking news stories and headlines, most notably in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and most prominently practiced by Fox News.[65]

In turn, sports television adopted aspects of political news punditry, such as panel discussions of current issues. *The Sports Reporters* (ESPN, 1988-2017) featured a panel of nationally renowned sports columnists from major newspapers and magazines, replicating the format of political roundtable shows like *The McLaughlin Group* and *Capital Gang*. The inaugural broadcast of *The Sports Reporters* on October 2, 1988, introduced the show as "an unrehearsed exchange of inside information and opinion from the nation's leading sports journalists."[66] Frequent panelist and *Detroit Free Press* columnist Mitch Albom described the format of the show in this way: "Collect sportswriters, put them around a host, let them debate, and end with 60-second commentaries called 'Parting Shots.'"[67]

The Sports Reporters shared both the time slot and format of programs like *The McLaughlin Group* (1982-), airing on Sunday mornings and featuring a range of columnists from

different publications and locations. The *New York Times* praised *The Sports Reporters*, claiming that the show "walks a fine line between the vituperativeness of talk radio and the boosterism of most televised sports by appealing to a vague nostalgia."[68] Here, print columnists fashioned themselves as more measured and composed than their talk radio contemporaries or pundits from the aforementioned "shout shows" dominating political television. The notion of "vague nostalgia" hinted at the decline of print media and the rise of television and, later, the internet. Bringing in established newspaper personalities not only brought in preexisting audiences from these columnists' careers, but also introduced these practitioners of an older media (print) to the aesthetics and styling of 24-hour sports television.

Albom deliberately contrasted *The Sports Reporters* with the high-intensity and often rancorous debates of *The McLaughlin Group* or *Crossfire*, dubbing their program "the last civil conversation."[69] *Boston Globe* columnist Bob Ryan insisted that, unlike political pundit shows, *The Sports Reporters'* panelists "weren't in it to seek conflict" or to "manufacture issues for the sake of entertainment."[70] *Sports Illustrated* noted in a retrospective that, unlike many political shows, the neutrality and seriousness of longtime hosts Dick Schaap and John Saunders gave the show "gravitas," in contrast to what they termed the "many egoists that floated as panelists.[71] Jemele Hill, former *ESPN* anchor and occasional *Sports Reporters* panelist, described the show as "our [sports writers'] version of *Meet the Press*" and as "the show of record for sports journalists."[72] Albom himself contributed to the blurring of lines between print punditry and television by simulcasting his radio talk show for a few months in 2001 on MSNBC (*The Mitch Albom Show*,) in addition to continuing his roles as a sports columnist, book writer, and panelist on *The Sports Reporters*.[73] The popularity and success of *The Sports Reporters* demonstrates

how deeply ingrained the idea of the print columnist as a TV pundit had become by the 1990s and the 2000s.

The transition of opinion columnists and radio hosts to television was met with resistance from some members of the print media establishment. Editors of sports sections ranging from Jack Sheppard of the *St. Petersburg Times* to Bill Dwyre of the *Los Angeles Times* cited their potential loss of income from reporters sharing information via television broadcast rather than through their print columns as a reason for their opposition to televised sports punditry.[74] Ultimately, however, editors such as Dave Smith of the *Dallas Morning News* accepted the split duty of sports columnists as both writers and television commentators as "a reality of the '90s."[75] Many other editors of sports sections cited the potential loss of income from reporters sharing information via television broadcast rather than through their print columns as a reason for their opposition to televised sports punditry.[76] The profitability of sports news, then, supported to many the popular notion that sports journalism was not as credible as political or traditional "hard news" journalism.

Mirroring the practices of cable news networks, this type of opinion-driven content proved relatively cheap to manufacture, translating the outrage discourse of sports talk radio to television like many cable news pundits' television programs. In the words of *The New York Times,* pundit-driven sports television programs typically involved finding "…hosts who test well and run[ning] the cameras while they yell at each other."[77] Speaking to this cost-friendly reality, Letukas states: "beyond the salaries of these hosts and the costs to construct the news stage facilities, punditry programming costs are virtually non-existent."[78] By relying less on live footage and reporting talents that were the hallmarks of news programs like *SportsCenter,* sports punditry shows slashed expenses and were capable of producing profitable content quickly and

effectively. For current reference, *the Motley Fool* reports that of the approximately $7.3 billion ESPN spent on all programming in 2016, nearly $5.5 billion (approximately ¾ of the costs) was spent on live programming costs.[79] In terms of the television industry, these shows on networks like ESPN and Fox Sports came to prominence during the "reality" television boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, in which numerous unscripted shows such as *Survivor, Big Brother,* and *The Apprentice* were both highly-rated and profitable ventures for networks.

This transition of sports pundits from print to television illustrates John Fiske's contention that television "tries to construct an ideal subject position which it invites us to occupy" and rewards viewers "with the ideological pleasure that is provided by experiencing…that our dominant ideological practice, apparently, *works*."[80] Consequently, these programs tailored their content to a presumably white and male audience, in terms of both the sports that were discussed and the pundits delivering the content. While *The Sports Reporters* featured several notable sportswriters of color, including Michael Wilbon and William C. Rhoden, in addition to notable female sports reporters such as Jackie MacMullan, the demographic makeup of sports journalists across various media remained predominantly white and male. Catherine R. Squires notes that "a majority of practitioners" in "the mainstream press," along with their sources and contacts, are "white and male." According to Squires, this produces "an echo chamber" for discussing and broadcasting race in mass media, with white producers of media steering reporters "to frame racial events from the standpoint of white Americans."[81]

These exclusionary practices are frequently replicated through the programming decisions of major sports news programs such as ESPN's *SportsCenter*, which, Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner, and Michela Musto chronicle, devoted a paltry 2% of its overall coverage to women's sports as recently as 2015.[82] In addition to sports news content skewing male, the

anchors delivering these newscasts were overwhelmingly male, with Messner and Margaret Carlisle Duncan noting that in a 2000 update to a study chronicling *SportsCenter* and local newscasts, 96.8% of TV anchors they surveyed were men. They further added that 60.2% of anchors were white men, signaling a hegemonic construction of sports fandom and knowledge as a white and male domain.[83] These percentages dipped slightly to 94.4% of sports anchors being men and 48.2% of anchors being white in a 2005 update to this study, signaling incremental diversification of the industry, especially along racial lines.[84] Bringing changes in these demographic statistics back to the paucity of women's sports content on these telecasts demonstrates that even as the on-camera diversity of anchors increased in terms of gender and race, the content of sports news itself remained largely male-centric.

As an emerging part of this sport-media complex, televised sports punditry reinforced racial and gendered status quos by keeping in place the stark divisions and conflicts between majority Black athletes and majority white sports media. This exemplifies what Michael Omi and Howard Winant theorize as a broader process of everything becoming "…racially coded because we live in a society where racial awareness is so pervasive."[85] This process occurs through macro- and micro- level interactions, in which quotidian activities like choosing which television programs to watch or which teams to follow contribute to a broader process of racial coding. The concentration of personalities on ESPN's burgeoning pundit-driven programming represented a geographically diverse range of media markets across the United States.

While ESPN popularized the pundit-driven format on sports television with *The Sports Reporters*, they were not its only practitioners. Another similar program airing concurrently was Chicago's *The Sports Writers on TV*, which was eventually syndicated nationally. The program had a nearly identical setup and format to *The Sports Reporters* but kept a more regional focus

on Chicago teams and athletes and exclusively featured writers and radio hosts based in the area.[86] The placement of sportswriters as pundits on multiple shows across networks, then, further cemented the popularity of print and radio pundits on television appearing on programs focusing on opinion, analysis, and the occasional debate. It also speaks to the proliferation of the genre, as local shows such as *The Sports Writers on TV* continued this synergy between opinion columns in newspapers and televised sports punditry.

Other channels eventually emerged as competition for ESPN's attempts to dominate cable sports television. Launching in 1996, CNN/Sports Illustrated (SI) merged the cable news giant CNN with *Sports Illustrated* to compete with ESPN and Fox Sports Net. CNN/SI executive vice president Steve Robinson proclaimed that the core values of the network were "news and storytelling and analysis" but also recognized "the need to diversify our programming…in order to gain distribution."[87] In addition to integrating the stylistic hallmarks of CNN with standard sports reporting, the network mirrored other cable channels by having several programs devoted to sports pundits giving their own commentaries on timely issues. The channel not only promoted various *Sports Illustrated* writers and personalities, but also featured newspaper columnists such as Jim Huber giving their opinions. Huber's CNN/SI program *The Sporting Life with Jim Huber* expressed a goal of relating "stories of grand inspiration" and "tales of people who challenge life's odds."[88] Programs like Huber's delivered not just sports news, but also provided commentary while folding current sports events into a larger sense of upholding sport as a value-making site. CNN/SI further blurred the lines between sports television and political television by featuring crossover appearances from CNN news anchors such as Fred Hickman and Nick Charles on their coverage of sports news.[89]

CNN/SI's use of pundits responds to the success of *The Sports Reporters* while copying elements of its own successful pundit-driven programming like *Capital Gang* and *Crossfire.* Even as then ESPN executive John Walsh denied a direct influence from CNN, it was clear that CNN's entry into the sports cable marketplace created a competition to break sports news first, even on the youth-focused ESPN2, as ESPN pledged to use this brand extension to continue to break news.[90] Retaliating to CNN, ESPN launched *ESPN: The Magazine* in 1998 to compete with *Sports Illustrated* in the print market.[91] CNN/SI left the air in 2002, reportedly without ever earning a profit in its five years of existence.[92] While the network ultimately failed to gain a foothold in the market, their commitment to merging cable news practices with sports news demonstrated an emerging synergy between print and television in sports media.

Radio Row: Foreshadowing the Rhetoric of Televised Sports Punditry

In addition to newspaper columnists, sports talk radio hosts gained visibility as pundits and authoritative voices on sports television. In both sports and politics, talk radio and televised cable punditry represent male domains and bastions of anti-political correctness sentiments, along with the aforementioned white male backlash to the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Zack Stiegler demonstrates that "shock" radio programs, such as *The Howard Stern Show,* whether comedic or political in nature, were built on the "incorporation of overtly offensive material for the purpose of titillation."[93] Popular sports radio hosts ranging from Dan Patrick to Scott Ferrall singled out Howard Stern for praise and influence, ranging from imitating Stern's format to turning their crew members into characters that interact with the host.[94] John Mark Dempsey continues this line of thought, generalizing that "while some stations and hosts"

provided "…expert postmortems of the local team's latest debacle…or predictions for the next all-important game," that the trend in the industry is toward "attitude" and "the more attitude, the better."[95] Here, "attitude" embodied a normative and desirable masculine trait for sports pundits on the radio.

Grant Farred dubbed sports talk radio, along with political talk radio, as "the most obvious, recognizable, and omnipresent form of public conversation."[96] *Washington Post* columnist Tony Kornheiser stated that the traditional hierarchy of sports media saw print journalists as being the most respected voices, with "radio guys" beneath them, and television as the domain of the "pretty boys."[97] This condescending attitude represents the division between the levels of economic and cultural capital ascribed to columnists, radio hosts, and television hosts in American sports media. While Korhneiser's verbal jab disparaged the presumed ability of radio and television sports talk hosts in comparison to the culturally prestigious job of sportswriting, Kornheiser himself eventually hosted a nationally syndicated radio show and a television program while simultaneously writing for *The Washington Post,* representing the growing synergy and fluid boundaries across sport punditry.

David Theo Goldberg notes that supremacy on talk radio airwaves is often measured by whether or not pundits and callers can "vent more entertainingly than the next guy" or if they can "shout louder or longer" than their competitors.[98] The popularity of sports talk radio had a somewhat dualistic relationship with print columnists. Dempsey observes that "many sportswriters double as sports-talk hosts" while, at the same time, they "are among the sharpest critics of sports-talk radio."[99] Goldberg also states that sports media "moulds subjects as seekers of spectatorial excitement [and] instantaneous gratification," further stating that sport's more general focus on "winners and losers, excitability and excitement [and] releasing nervous

energy…" all work to create fanatical listeners and hosts.[100] David Nylund concurred with this aspect of radio sport punditry in a lengthy study of *The Jim Rome Show,* claiming that on sports talk radio, female athletes are either ignored or are "trivialized or objectified" as a means of keeping sports talk radio a male space.[101] This spirit of confrontation permeating the often-contentious exchanges between listeners and hosts on the phone lines provided punditry on sports talk radio with a more abrasive tenor than the wry witticisms of its print counterparts.

A prime example of the permeability between sports talk radio and sports television is the career arc of Jim Rome. After graduating from the University of California Santa Barbara, Rome worked for various Southern California radio stations until *The Jim Rome Show* achieved national syndication in 1996. Rome's on-air persona was brash, opinionated, and controversial, as he frequently sparred with callers and guests alike, engaging in "smack talk." As his profile as a radio titan continued to rise, Rome also hosted an hour-long talk show on ESPN2, titled *Talk2,* which began in 1993 and ran until 1998. Leaning into the youthful, edgy, brand of ESPN2, *Talk2* featured Rome's takes on sports along with often confrontational interviews with prominent guests. Former ESPN executive Mark Shapiro described Rome as "a tough interviewer" who will "ask anything, even if it gets him beat up."[102] Rome's television career on ESPN was, of course, highlighted—or lowlighted, depending on one's perspective—by a physical confrontation on *Talk2* with NFL quarterback Jim Everett in 1994. Rome incensed Everett by mockingly referring to him as "Chris," a comparison to female tennis player Chris Evert that questioned Everett's masculine toughness.[103] Both Rome and ESPN executive Mark Shapiro denied accusations that the confrontation was staged, bringing the connection between the exaggerated hypermasculinity of professional wrestling and political punditry discussed earlier squarely into the realm of televised sports punditry.

The program's style and success reflected the translatability of radio punditry to television programming. Returning to the network nearly a decade later in 2003, Rome hosted a similar 30-minute program called *Jim Rome is Burning,* blending his "takes" on current sports issues with interviews of athletes and sports media members in what amounted to a condensed version of his radio show. Currently, his nationally syndicated radio show (*The Jim Rome Show*) is simulcast on CBS Sports Network in addition to a standalone program *Rome* on CBS Sports Network and a semi-regular program on Showtime, proving that the rhetoric and style of radio sports punditry translated easily to successful pundit driven shows on sports television.

Another important link between sports punditry and radio broadcasts occurred on the East coast, with Mike Francesa and Chris "Mad Dog" Russo and their pivotal sports talk radio show *Mike and the Mad Dog. Rolling Stone* described the impact of the show as follows: "every sports talk show has its own imitations of Mike and Dog, one gruff guy, one guy a little unhinged, getting worked up and disagreeing with each other. But no show has been quite the same – in timing or impact – especially not in New York."[104] *Bleacher Report* credited *Mike and the Mad Dog* for having "pioneered the all-sports format" of talk radio, "which has been replicated and expanded throughout the world, changing the way Americans view and consume their sports content."[105] The program's impact provided a template for sports media pundits in years to come, and was televised on the YES network as a simulcast beginning in 2002.

Sports radio punditry echoed the outrage discourse of political pundits such as Limbaugh and Hannity but eschewed the explicit racial backlash and conservatism present on those political talk programs. In lieu of explicit political outrage, the outrage was instead conveyed through the frequent "hot takes" of radio hosts. Here, "hot takes" are understood as opinions designed to generate reactions from callers and listeners, whether positive or negative, helping

the program and pundit/host acquire notoriety. While the sports talk radio format proved to be translatable to television, it, like its print peers, also remained a bastion of whiteness and maleness. An overwhelming majority of sports radio hosts (89.8% of sports radio employees in 2002) were white males railing against what they saw as the ills of overpaid athletes, a majority of whom were people of color.[106]

An exception to this masculine norm among sports talk radio pundits was Nanci Donnellan, colloquially known to listeners as the "Fabulous Sports Babe." Donnellan hosted a nationally syndicated radio show from 1994 to 2001. Attempting to explain Donnellan's success, programming consultant Rick Scott offered the following: "'Nobody cares about Xs and Os…It's not about information and a unique perspective'" and that "'The Babe's got a real grasp on the entertainment aspect.'"[107] A *New York Times* profile of Donnellan suggested that her success was due in part to the amount of research she conducted, and also to an "unexpected friction from undercutting stereotypes," such as the stereotypical assertion that sports media and sports knowledge were exclusively male domains.[108] Even while Donnellan blazed a trail for women in radio sports punditry, she achieved success in part through adopting the confrontational attitude of her male peers in political and sports radio. For example, she frequently clashed with callers, exhorting them to "get a job, get a haircut, and get a life," and the *Tampa Bay Times* noted (almost wistfully) that "today's screamers have nothing on the Babe."[109] Her success, then, both defied and reified the gendered barriers of sports punditry and sports media more generally, as her brash and vituperative character of the "Fabulous Sports Babe" achieved success in part because she deliberately downplayed femininity and performed like "one of the boys" on the radio. This revealed not just a preoccupation with male dominance

behind the radio microphone, but also industrial preferences catering to a presumed conservative, white, male audience, a trend that carried over to televised sports punditry.

Blurring Lines: "Infotainment" at ESPN through *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight*

The success of programs such as *SportsCenter* and *The Sports Reporters* mirrored trends on cable news, whose most successful programs demonstrated that it was a requirement to entertain viewers while delivering breaking news. These programs starred ESPN anchors I term "proto-pundits," individuals whose styles and ability to draw viewers laid the groundwork for future pundit-driven programs on the network. Like their cable political news peers, these proto-pundits filled distinctive roles on ESPN, ranging from nerdy uber-sports fans (Keith Olbermann) to hip-hop savvy Black fans (Stuart Scott) to women who could hold their own with their male peers (Robin Roberts and Suzy Kolber). In attempting to appeal to numerous audiences by hiring a diverse range of anchors, ESPN sought to bring together multiple audiences within the sports television audience market. By having its anchors deliver the news and highlights and occasional commentaries on current events in sports in uniquely individual styles, ESPN reinforced its commitment to developing "infotainment" programs to supplement their live event broadcasts.

Upon taking an executive role with ESPN in 1987, John Walsh "suggested that ESPN should devote greater resources to *SportsCenter* and use the flagship program as the main platform to grow and promote its brand."[110] Walsh's print background explained his desire to turn *SportsCenter* into "a kind of one-hour video version of a newspaper" where "play of stories was determined by importance."[111] As evidence of ESPN's alternative approach to newscasting, former *SportsCenter* anchor and late-night comedian Craig Kilborn recalled that on *SportsCenter*

"there were always catchphrases and jokes" and that "sometimes the producers would pitch them to you."[112] Kilborn's quote reinforces the emphasis producers at ESPN placed on entertainment as a critical strategy to expanding their audience for *SportsCenter*. Demonstrating the importance of the anchors' unconventional deliveries and presence to the marketing of the show, ESPN featured *SportsCenter* anchors alongside athletes in its widely praised "This is *SportsCenter"* ad campaign.[113] *Sports Illustrated* referred to these ads, which treated anchors as peers to famous sports stars, as "among the best things on TV."[114]

Whereas cable sports news programs such as *SportsCenter* still primarily centered on news and highlights, anchors were encouraged to develop distinctive personalities to deliver the information. Sudeep Sharma describes *SportsCenter* as "a meta-analytic program, which reported not just on events, but also organized them into a logical whole."[115] Sharma's contention links ESPN to a broader concept of cable television as a maker of social meaning. *SportsCenter* was (and remains) a crucial agent in branding ESPN as the authoritative voice on sports television, in a manner similar to Fox News branding itself as the primary conservative news outlet and CNN branding itself as the premier cable outlet for breaking news.

ESPN used a diverse range of *SportsCenter* anchors meant to appeal to numerous demographics, from the self-parodying aesthetic of Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick to the more "solid, straightforward" teaming of Bob Ley and Robin Roberts.[116] ESPN also continued to put women on shows such as *SportsCenter* despite resistance from male-dominated focus groups that claimed "nobody wants to get their sports from women," with the exception of Roberts, who, according to focus group participants, "was able to connect with those guys who believe that they don't want their sports from women."[117] By branching out from exclusively white and male anchor pairings in terms of race, gender, and age, ESPN achieved greater visual on-air

diversity than its cable news counterparts in hopes of reaching segmented audiences outside of ESPN's traditionally coveted demographic of white male "sports junkies."[118] I contend that this practice exemplifies what Jennifer Fuller theorizes as cable television's usage of Blackness as "a signifier for 'quality' and 'edginess' in the 1990s and early 2000s."[119]

In placing Black anchors and pundits alongside white peers, ESPN eschewed the majority-Black programming approaches of networks like FOX and UPN, attempting to add Black viewers through an appeal to a neoliberal notion of multicultural representation. ESPN eventually extended this co-opting of hip-hop vernacular and imagery through promoting Scott onto other programming. These later efforts, according to Victoria E. Johnson, "invoked the individualism associated with sporting achievement and hip hop to simultaneously encourage and reward an investment in the status quo and corporate ideals."[120] To diversify their share of audience segments even further, ESPN created sister channel ESPN2 and hired John Lack, an early executive at MTV, prior to its launch in 1993 to help ESPN2 develop new programs, including *SportsNight*. Lack specifically recalled that he "wanted a good sports talk show aimed at a younger audience," in part because "we didn't have much sports talk on ESPN because [John] Walsh had never been interested in that genre; they all reminded him of Howard Cosell."[121] This linkage between Olbermann and Cosell suggests ESPN viewed Olbermann as a proto-pundit, with his unique style and ability to entertain with his comments mixing into the news being a key selling point of the program and, to a lesser extent, the channel itself.

Due to his tenure as a star anchor of both *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight* and his later career on MSNBC, Keith Olbermann represents a relevant crossover point between televised sports punditry and political punditry on television. Beginning in 1992, prior to his eventual stints at Fox Sports and MSNBC, Olbermann anchored *SportsCenter*. A 1996 profile in *SPIN*

magazine praised the "articulate and acerbic" pairing of Olbermann and Patrick for speaking "for that most ignored element in the sports equation: the fan."[122] Olbermann became known for working historical and political references into sports highlights, inspiring both fans and detractors while attempting to connect straight forward sports news to a broader rhetorical and political sphere.[123] ESPN's preference for anchors to project fan-centric elements of the anchors' identity solidifies the profitability of the network's focus on "infotainment," connecting sports news to history, pop culture, and other discursive spheres in hopes of elevating newscasting to broader audiences. Mirroring the partisan framework of Fox News, anchors were not simply seen as detached deliverers of scores but as fans of various athletes and teams. Bryan Curtis praised this presentation in a retrospective of "the Big Show" pairing of Olbermann and Patrick's *SportsCenter,* writing that "unlike your local sportscaster, Olbermann was as excited about the games as you were."[124]

Olbermann became the featured personality on ESPN2's *SportsNight* in 1993 before returning to *SportsCenter* in 1994 and resuming his unique on-air chemistry with fellow anchor Dan Patrick. In positioning these two as a team of uber-fans while drenching themselves in self-deprecation, ESPN paved the way for the eventual Tony Kornheiser/Michael Wilbon pairing that would define its first daily pundit program, *Pardon the Interruption*. Eventually, after a stint with Fox Sports Network, Olbermann transitioned to political punditry in the 2000s, starring in *Countdown* on MSNBC. Olbermann's success on ESPN was, in a manner similar to political pundits, based primarily on his ability to create a character and personal brand for himself as a smart, sardonic observer and baseball fanatic that connected sports to the outside world. Olbermann's 1993-1994 stint on *SportsNight* represented part of ESPN's hopes to use ESPN2 to capture younger demographics for advertisers. *Broadcasting and Cable* identified ESPN2 and its

flagship news show *SportsNight* as programming that targeted "the age 18-25 audience rather than the traditional 25-54 target for ESPN."[125]

ESPN's insistence that *SportsNight* feature commentary and humor alongside news was not without internal friction at the network. According to Olbermann, then ESPN executive John Walsh told him that Olbermann and Patrick's 11:00 PM *SportsCenter* time slot had the show's largest percentage of viewers under the age of twenty-five, and, subsequently, that he wanted to move "that audience [those under twenty-five] over there [to ESPN2] and keep *SportsCenter* for adults!"[126] Walsh's comments showed how, even in sports, Olbermann's singular style of delivery and presence as a proto-pundit was a potential draw for younger viewers. *SportsNight* also built off of the success of *SportsCenter* and *The Sports Reporters*, as the show featured regular commentaries not just from Olbermann, but also from Mitch Albom and Suzy Kolber, in addition to comedy sketches. Eschewing the formality of news anchors, neither Olbermann nor Albom wore ties behind the desk, signaling further the program's intention to obfuscate the lines between sports news and youth-oriented entertainment.[127]

SportsCenter and *SportsNight*, along with ESPN's highly successful "This is *SportsCenter*" ad campaigns, were, according to Sharma, "embedded in the larger sports entertainment complex where viewership is not just simple consumption but part of one's larger identity of being a fan."[128] Olbermann himself claimed that *SportsNight* wasn't going to "come down from our high horse and say 'This is a big football game…here are the highlights'…We're not going to presume you have nothing better to do than watch us…We're going to sell us."[129] Olbermann likened the style of his and Patrick's *SportsCenter* to "improvisational jazz" because of its deviance from the norms and practices of traditional network and political news.[130]

In addition to utilizing different presentation tactics than their political counterparts on cable television, ESPN's *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight* featured greater representation of people of color on their programs than political pundit shows. Beginning on ESPN2's *SportsNight* in 1993 and continuing later with *SportsCenter,* the presentation techniques of Stuart Scott connected sports television (and ESPN more specifically) with ongoing discourses concerning hip-hop and Blackness in popular culture. Scott frequently referenced hip-hop artists and lyrics in his commentaries on *SportsNight* and later *SportsCenter,* using Scott to sell ESPN to both Black and white audiences.[131] By trumpeting their association with hip-hop-friendly personalities such as Scott, ESPN marketed hip-hop vernacular through Scott's presence to white, male audiences while simultaneously avoiding the broader racial and political discourses associated with hip-hop. This reflects Grant Farred's interpretation of sports talk on *SportsCenter* as a place where "whiteness and Blackness can comingle."[132]

The *Atlantic* described Scott's rhetorical style on *SportsCenter* as akin to "talking about sports in the same way that fans, watching the game in their living room, do."[133] Here, focus belongs not on the authenticity of Scott's performances of hip-hop vernacular but instead on how Scott served as a means for ESPN to acquire cultural capital with fans of hip-hop, and with younger viewers in general. Indeed, longtime ESPN employee Jemele Hill recounted that "…the popularity of Stuart Scott…brought in a huge number of Black people who didn't look at ESPN like a cool product or that weren't really checking for it."[134] ESPN's promotion of Scott's hip-hop-inflected deliveries on *SportsCenter* revealed their desire to court Black sports fans in addition to the presumed white, male sports fan demographic targeted by the network's major advertisers. Scott recalled receiving hate mail and angry voicemails from viewers over his commentating style, proving that ESPN's disruption of the presumed whiteness of sports

anchoring was not without resistance from conservative audiences.[135] Some resistance even occurred within ESPN, as coworkers recalled ESPN executives complaining to Scott about not understanding his vernacular references and challenging the scripts he wrote for his shows.[136]

The placement of Scott's distinctively Black style next to white anchors like Dan Patrick or Rich Eisen fit into vague notions of both racial assimilation and a "postracial" understanding where equal screen time for white and Black men on the program signaled that every perspective was being represented.[137] By primarily associating Scott with sports and hip-hop culture, however, ESPN "othered" him in relation to his white colleagues, trading on his differentiation in rhetorical style and fashion in comparison to the more "traditional" white and male anchors on the network. In contrast to Fox News' aggressive targeting of a segmented conservative audience, ESPN used *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight* to capture multiple segments of the cable audience by promoting selected women and minority anchors on these shows, even as they reified popular stereotypes about Blackness and femininity.

ESPN's dualistic relationship with race exists in a broader pattern of sports media practicing covert and overt racism. Mary G. McDonald asserts that sports media has historically "legitimate[d] inequitable social conditions by focusing on the alleged physical and 'personal' attributes of Black bodies while largely ignoring social structural disparities that continue to disproportionately impact people of color."[138] Programs like *SportsCenter, SportsNight,* and *The Sports Reporters* largely reinforced this dynamic, presenting highlights and offering commentary on feats of Black athleticism for audiences. Sports pundits largely reinforced popular stereotypes about Blackness and Black masculinity by using coded terms such as "natural athletes" and "individualistic" to describe Black players, while lauding white players with descriptors such as "students of the game" or "hard workers."[139]

Despite its on-camera diversity, ESPN was not immune to these structural disparities and, in some instances, perpetuated them. Former director of human resources Ricardo Correia reflected that ESPN's issues with diversity involved "more than just putting a Black face on television," adding that "the issue is in the continuum of the culture of this company, where people of color, and women can come in and be exposed to developmental opportunities." [140] Correia admitted that "those chances are few and far between."[141] Correia also detailed many Black employees leaving ESPN "because they were in the same assistant position [for] three, four, or five years and whites had jumped over them."[142] This juxtaposition of diversity on camera without accompanying diversity behind the camera in positions of power undercut ESPN's efforts to differentiate themselves from political pundit programs on cable channels.

ESPN also had a fraught relationship with gender bias, both on and off the air. ESPN's programming reinforced the concept of sports media and sports punditry as male terrains. For example, ESPNews anchor Betsy Ross stated that upon her arrival at the network in the late 1990s, there were only "five females of the nearly sixty anchors for all the networks."[143] ESPN put more female anchors and analysts on the air in the 1990s and 2000s in the wake of numerous complaints of sexual harassment against the network. As evidence of this, Michael Freeman reported that "dozens of male executives, producers, anchors, and on-air personalities have been accused of sexually harassing female employees," adding that "ESPN management was eventually forced to either fire, suspend, or reprimand a number of men at the network…for inappropriate sexual conduct throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s."[144] The prevalence of harassment echoes Hirsch and Kimmel's earlier-cited concepts of "locker room-like" machismo and hypermasculinity carrying over beyond the airwaves into the daily lives of media companies like ESPN.

The gendered ceiling did not just exist in the form of sexual harassment but also manifested through more subtle expectations of female employees by producers. Former ESPN executive John Lack claimed that *SportsNight* star Suzy Kolber, despite having years of experience on local sports television, was selected for *SportsNight* because "she's attractive and she's fun and she's got a sizzle" adding that he thought Kolber "wouldn't be the Suzy Kolber you see today" under John Walsh at ESPN.[145] Kolber also recounted the difficulties of working with Keith Olbermann concerning their respective roles on the show, contending that he was often bullying and demeaning to her and other employees.[146] Other female employees, like Robin Roberts, found success on *SportsCenter* by developing "an ability to coexist on an equal plane with 'the guys' without trying to become one of them."[147] Even while providing increased opportunities to women, ESPN reflected male interests and catered to the network's expectation of capturing a predominantly male audience with its programming by focusing on the physical appearance of its female anchors rather than solely on their sports knowledge or broadcast abilities. ESPN's programming, despite with efforts to diversify on-camera talent, was still largely in control of white men behind the camera, and this contributed to frequent tokenizing and marginalizing of nonwhite and nonmale employees.

The placement of pundit-driven programs in direct support of ESPN's news broadcasts or games reflects elements of Raymond Williams's foundational concept of sequence and flow in TV.[148] Programs like *SportsCenter* continued newspaper columnists' earlier emphasis on hegemonically constructed values such as individual and collective excellence, highlighting popular players and teams and outstanding athletic achievements to maximize viewership. Shows like *The Sports Reporters* that discussed contemporary sports news on Sunday mornings supplemented *SportsCenter's* declared importance of certain athletes, teams, and stories. Often,

the repetition of these foci by pundit programs upheld sport as a male terrain, with the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, and Major League Baseball dominating not just sports news coverage and broadcast airtime, but sports talk as well. In centering commentary from personalities like Olbermann, Scott, and Kolber on news programs like *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight*, ESPN laid the groundwork for future programs focusing on commentary from established personalities. This flow of opinions and information additionally reinforced the image of majority white pundits discussing the performance of primarily non-white athletes. This augmented popular stereotypes about white control of nonwhite sporting bodies, a reality reflected in the scant number of coaches, executives and owners of color across major North American professional sports in comparison to the much larger diversity of the player pools in those sports.[149]

This focus on entertainment and marketing would soon be applied to the main branch of ESPN, opening up a space for punditry to play a prominent role in future programs. Sports punditry, both in its early stages and in its current iterations, reflects broader racial and gender politics of the United States through its centering of white and male voices, its amplification of outrage discourse, and its convergence of old media practices valorizing hegemonic masculinity and individualism. And even as networks diversified the voices featured in front of the camera, positions of power at major sports television networks remained nearly all white and male, rendering this diverse representation superficial rather than structural while continuously centering white male perspectives on sports and social issues. In focusing on these perspectives, ESPN employed nonwhite and non-male talent in positions to appeal to visions of a postracial America and corporate multiculturalism, increasing diversity largely without investigating or challenging ongoing systemic racism or sexism in sports and sports media.

The next chapter explores how ESPN continued to navigate racial and gender issues through a critical analysis of the popular program *Pardon the Interruption*, or *PTI* (2001-). *PTI* represents in part a continuation of the politics of *The Sports Reporters*, situating televised sports punditry as a site for good natured debate, largely ignoring systemic issues of racial and gender discrimination in favor of upholding sports (and, by proxy, sports media) as a postracial, post-sexist utopian meritocracy. The program is also notable for moving sports punditry from Sunday mornings squarely into a daily primetime viewing slot. *PTI* links to this chapter's industrial history by centering on two pundits who wrote opinionated sports columns for *The Washington Post* and appeared on television occasionally to give their sports opinions. In continuing *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight's* emphasis on visual on-camera diversity, I will argue that *PTI* represents a continuation of ESPN's channel-wide branding, transforming elements of *The Sports Reporters* into a daily program, taking cues from political debate programs like *Crossfire* and *The McLaughlin Group* to give the network an effective and popular daily program to supplement *SportsCenter* and its live sportscasts.

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CHAPTER 2

BLACK AND WHITE AND BALD ALL OVER: *PARDON THE INTERRUPTION* AND POSTRACIAL MULTICULTURALISM

> "PTI" makes for addictive, irresistible viewing. The show's formula has been widely emulated. This works fine for sports, where, ultimately, the verbal sparring and subsequent rush to ephemeral judgment involves overgrown men in numbered pajamas chasing balls and waving sticks. But politics and policy are another matter.
>
> -Patrick Hruby, *The Atlantic.*[1]

Introduction

Premiering in October of 2001, ESPN's *Pardon the Interruption* (*PTI*) paired veteran *Washington Post* sports columnists Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser across a debate desk every weekday for thirty minutes. The show represents an attempt to recreate their frequent and legendary arguments in the *Post* newsroom, taking place as a lead-in to *SportsCenter* every weekday evening. *PTI* features one white sportswriter (Kornheiser) and one Black sportswriter (Wilbon) arguing about contemporary sports issues laid out on a vertical "rundown" of topics on the right side of the screen as a clock timed their arguments. The show proved to be exceptionally successful, currently airing in its twentieth year in its original format with the same two pundits as hosts.

At the time of *PTI's* 2001 debut, ESPN's on-air talent base was far more diverse than many other cable news networks' lineups. Despite this on-camera diversity, I contend that ESPN's programming, including *PTI,* attempted to draw in minority viewers without alienating the white male demographics sought by the network's advertising partners. Through diversifying its on-air talent, ESPN demonstrated a commitment to "postracial" ideology, in which race was no longer seen as a barrier to individual or collective success and people of all races appear on television as peers. *PTI* reproduces these postracial ideologies by building its program around an

interracial male duo noted not just for their strong opinions as columnists, but also for their long-tenured friendship and self-effacing styles, which undercut the seriousness of their arguments.

This chapter examines how *PTI* contributed to the changing landscape of sport punditry and continued sports punditry's expansion and transition from print columns and sports talk radio to television and digital formats. Industrially, I argue that *PTI* was a turning point for what Thomas P. Oates and I term the "televised sport debate format," setting up the popular and oft-imitated format of an interracial male debate pairing used to frame sport as a site of both racial conflict and unity.[2] Then-ESPN Executive Mark Shapiro created *PTI* with the aim of emulating CNN's *Crossfire* while also both complementing and leading into ESPN's flagship news program *SportsCenter*.[3] I explain how the emergence and sustained popularity of *PTI* reflects an emphasis on postracialism and visual multiculturalism espoused in politics and popular culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. Through a critical close reading of *PTI* and an analysis of the show's larger cultural and political contexts, I posit that the enduring success and popularity of the program demonstrates the popularity of a postracial, superficially multicultural vision of America in sports, politics, and television. This postracial attitude centered on broadcasting scenes of visual multicultural diversity in front of the camera and portraying racism as an individual issue, largely framing systemic racism as a relic of America's past.

Due to its all-male paring and frequent focus on male sports and athletes, *PTI* also reinforced notions of sports, and sports media more specifically, as an old boys club, usually ignoring female participation and contribution to contemporary sports and sports media. *PTI's* general aversion toward and occasional marginalization of female athletes and sports stands in for prevalent attitudes toward women and women's athletics in sports media. This adoption of a

conservative outlook on gender and sex separation in sports, I explain, mirrors *PTI's* and ESPN's consistent appeals to postracialism and multiculturalism, endorsing a form of postfeminism.

Creating *PTI*- Converging Print Practices onto Debate Shows

ESPN executive and *PTI* creator Mark Shapiro gave voice to the network's desire to mirror cable debate shows, recounting that he "wrote a treatment to John Walsh and Steve Anderson that we should be doing our own version of *Crossfire*, which turned out to be *PTI*."[4]. Much of this crossover potential between genres also reflects the combative nature of sports talk radio and competing sports fans more generally, as masculinity in this arena was measured less by physical prowess or confrontation than by demonstrating a combination of sports knowledge, outrage, and the occasional discursive barb intended to best one's opponent. When asked about *PTI*, executive producer Erik Rydholm claimed he was not drawn to the concept of the program itself, but that he wanted to work with Kornheiser and Wilbon. Specifically, Rydholm emphasized the friendship spanning the differences between these two men, who he described as "One older, one younger; one Black, one white; one Jewish, one gentile." However, Rydholm noted that they still possessed "the only relationship I'd [Rydholm] ever seen in which two people who clearly loved each other could scream at each other but neither took it personally."[5] Kornheiser had previously engaged in debate segments made for ESPN2 in 1993 in a program titled *Wise Guys*; however, the program never made it to air.[6] Prior to the launch of *PTI*, Kornheiser had achieved acclaim in the industry, with *Sports Illustrated* dubbing him "the most entertaining voice on ESPN Radio."[7] In a manner similar to selecting panelist for *The Sports*

Reporters, ESPN Executives recognized the translatability of both men's print columns to television, bringing sports punditry onto the newer medium of the daily debate show.

When asked about the success of *PTI* by *Sports Illustrated* in 2002, Shapiro stated that "'debate is what sells these days,'" specifically "'blood and guts debate,'" further opining that "'Sports is often defined by argument: Who's better? It's riveting entertainment.'"[8] Rather than emphasizing the friendship of the two pundits, Shapiro, in an early press release, claimed: "'these two gentlemen are insightful, entertaining, and thought-provoking, and inclined to be enemies, when pushed properly.'"[9] Shapiro's allusion to pushing the pundits "properly" to act as enemies on-camera indicates that confrontation between hosts was a proven and popular formula, demonstrated by the aforementioned success of similar programs like CNN's *Crossfire* and *Capital Gang,* and PBS' *The McLaughlin Group* while also implicitly recognizing the limits and potential pitfalls of pushing pundits "improperly" on air.

This strategy of pursuing argument as a programming strategy, however light-hearted the tone of the show may have been, echoes the industrial climate of cable television favoring what Nimmo and Combs termed "confrontational chatter" on debate shows.[10] While the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks contributed to calls for national unity, the rising popularity of argumentative and opinionated content on cable news channels such as Fox News confirmed that opinion and argument-based programs like *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity and Colmes* still garner high ratings in a variety of social and cultural circumstances. This paradoxical form of unity through disunity extolled parallel American values of free speech and disagreement while also employing anger against people who threatened American norms as a good and necessary male response. Furthermore, the *Sports Business Journal* recognized that Shapiro and ESPN's turn to opinion shows like *PTI, Jim Rome is Burning,* and *Quite Frankly with Stephen A Smith*

during the 2000s all "took a page from Fox News," further demonstrating sports television's embraceof the opinion/debate genre on cable television more broadly, as well as the cultural politics these shows entailed.[11] Specifically, these cultural politics manifested through performances of male grievances against underperforming athletes and coaches and celebrations of heroic efforts, under the guise of commentary and analysis meant to supplement newscasts.

Shapiro expected the program to both complement and differentiate itself from *SportsCenter,* as *PTI* served as the 5:30 lead-in to the 6 PM *SportsCenter* broadcast. Since *PTI* would be talking about many of the same events as *SportsCenter,* Shapiro believed that it would lift *SportsCenter* by building interest in these subjects while also covering them in a different style.[12] Executive Jim Cohen said *PTI* had two essential requirements: that it be "…like no other show on television, and that it be the best show on television."[13] This grandiose emphasis on distinctive programming gestures toward a contemporary saturation of the pundit-driven programming across cable news. Specifically, it represents the realities of narrowcasting and niche programming in the early 2000s cable landscape while also highlighting the previous paucity of such a format on sports television. It also extends the polarization for profit model employed at Fox News and, to a lesser degree, CNN, to sports television, aiming to replicate the success of debate programs dividing pundits and viewers across two opposing sides of an issue.

When Rydholm explained his vision for the program to Kornheiser and Wilbon, he envisioned the program as an all-encompassing talk show. Rydholm detailed that he wanted the show to be unafraid to tackle "any of the hard issues in sports, any of the soft issues in sports, or even…Britney Spears."[14] Rydholm's vision for a sports program bleeding into popular culture demonstrates a continuing shift in the industry to not just present sports news and highlights but also attract new fans to ESPN through expansive cultural references. *PTI's* refusal to simply

"stick to sports" and penchant for adding in popular culture references to its talking points, then, also speaks to the earlier trend of personality and style mattering just as much, if not more, to pundits' popularity than knowledge of the subject matter being discussed, a trend outlined in Chapter 1 on ESPN2's *SportsNight*. *PTI's* popularity marked a departure from longstanding conventions of *The Sports Reporters*, as the show emphasized the personalities of the pundits and universal appeal of the conversation rather than on their qualifications or the merits of their arguments. *PTI*, then, represented the continual popularization of absorbing traditional sportswriters onto television as commentators, using the dueling pundit format to superficially represent diversity on camera and expanding *The Sports Reporters'* weekly meetings on Sundays to a daily, half-hour format.

Initially, Kornheiser was highly skeptical of *PTI's* viability, remarking to Rydholm that he didn't expect the show to last three months, but that he had "several other jobs," so he would be fine.[15] Kornheiser's allusion to multiple jobs referenced his ongoing tenure at *The Washington Post* as well as hosting *The Tony Kornheiser Show* for ESPN Radio. Translating the banter of newspaper writers to television required confronting not just logistical challenges, but also a shift in the perception of television from the pundits themselves. More specifically, it required challenging the negative cultural capital and perceived lack of masculinity print sportswriters ascribed to sports television. Many sportswriters shared Kornheiser's disdain for television work despite the long-running status of *The Sports Reporters*. Kornheiser had to also overcome an "utter contempt for television" and "utter contempt for anybody involved in television sports," an opinion he claimed that "all sportswriters had." Television sportscasters, he contended, were just "hairdos who just got in the way in the locker room."[16] As mentioned in Chapter 1, Kornheiser outlined the traditional hierarchy of sports media, where print journalists were the most respected

voices, with "radio guys" beneath them and television at the bottom, was the domain of the "pretty boys."[17]

Kornheiser's forced unlearning of heteronormative contempt for "hairdos" and "pretty boys," however, did not signal a broadening of sex and gender perspectives and play in cable sports journalism. Instead, it expanded traditional concepts of hegemonic masculinity's purview into new genres as these genres were seen as increasingly profitable and legitimate. Wilbon added that he and Kornheiser "grew up as cynics," and that cynicism present in their performances of punditry was not always an appreciated stance at ESPN's headquarters in Bristol, Connecticut.[18] *PTI* reflected these attitudes by repackaging cynicism as a masculine trait among sports journalists and fans, selling the edgy and cantankerous banter between Kornheiser and Wilbon as a calling card of the program, which used irony and self-deprecation to advance its brand of self-aware humor.

PTI's success spoke to changes in the practice of sport punditry, as Kornheiser and Wilbon upheld their commitment to print journalism by continuing to write for *The Washington Post* until television commitments forced them to give up their columnist duties in 2008 and 2010, respectively. Wilbon argued that working in television would hone his print columns due to television's focus on clarity and concise thoughts, while expanding their national profiles. Specifically, he stated that "'when you write for television, your thoughts have to be condensed into lines," but that "when you're writing for print, your thoughts are expanded into paragraphs."[19] These comments represent a convergence of punditry from print to television and, to a lesser extent, the internet, distilling content from columns to smaller sound bytes. Wilbon's comments reflect the differing preferences of television viewers and print readers, implying that the quick-moving pace of *PTI* and its timer were meant to serve an audience with a lower

attention span, precipitating social media's emphasis on brevity and simplification. Furthermore, Wilbon added that despite the higher salary of television, he still said the following: "'If someone asks what I am, I say 'I'm a columnist,' not a television person.'"[20] These comments reflect Wilbon's opinions that working for *The Washington Post* still carried more prestige and social respectability than working for ESPN. ESPN used this association with respected journalists like Kornheiser and Wilbon in turn to generate more credibility for the network's programming across the board.

Whereas *The Sports Reporters* differed from other news discussion and debate shows by promoting what panelist Mitch Albom termed "the last civil conversation," *PTI* replicated certain elements of *The Sports Reporters'* format—the 30-minute time frame, the discussion of multiple national issues in sports—but branched out in several other ways. One of the important differences between the programs was the inclusion of a timer for debate topics. Rydholm quipped that he installed a timer because "I wanted, essentially, a show to change topics faster than you felt like flipping the channel."[21] This fast-paced style and timed argument segmentation replaced the vituperative marshaling of time perfected by moderators like John McLaughlin of *The McLaughlin Group* with an impartial clock and a ringing bell reminiscent of a boxing match marking the taking up of another topic. It also reflects changing viewership habits, as the plethora of options now available to viewers via the explosion of cable channels and networks gave viewers more choices to consume sports talk and sports news, so visions like Rydholm's allowed for *PTI* to cater to these lower attention spans. The timer not only allowed *PTI* to tackle more debate topics, but also gave viewers hope, when combined with the visual rundown, that other topics would soon be discussed and there was no need to change the channel.

Another important difference was the constant presence of the aforementioned rundown column on the right side of the screen. This rundown demonstrated not only the breadth of topics expected to be discussed each episode, but also cued viewers in to stay tuned for specific topics which would appear later in the program. *PTI* also recreates the feel of a fight through the dinging of a bell hearkening to boxing matches to mark the designated end of each debate segment. This shortening of debate segments kept both pundits on topic while also allowing them to cover a plethora of subjects and current issues in the world of sports within the half-hour time frame. *PTI* also differentiated itself further from the established format of political debate shows like *Hannity and Colmes* and *The McLaughlin Group* through a segment in the middle of each program titled "Five Good Minutes." During this segment, Kornheiser and Wilbon took a break from the 1-on-1 debate format to interview an important figure in the sports world. The inclusion of interview segments in addition to debates served to showcase the journalistic background of both pundits within the clearly delineated marketplace for debate on television.

While both pundits possessed highly credentialed backgrounds as print journalists writing columns addressing serious issues, another distinguishing feature of *PTI* was the self-deprecating ethos of the program and its hosts. The collegial and humorous tone of the arguments and debates resonated across generational lines with younger viewers, who surprised Kornheiser when he claimed young fans told him: "it's like watching our parents argue."[22] The comparison of Kornheiser and Wilbon to arguing parents demonstrates ESPN's attempts to reach multiple age demographics with every program. The tone here reflected the comparatively less tense world of sports media in contrast to political media, which found itself increasingly divided along partisan and ideological lines in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. By positioning itself as nonpartisan escapist entertainment in stark contrast

to political punditry's debates over ongoing political and military conflicts, *PTI* managed to accrue a consistently popular image within sports television.[23]

Examples of *PTI's* jocular atmosphere are frequently seen in the show's cold opens. Wilbon starts each show in a center close up shot, stating "Pardon the interruption, but I'm Mike Wilbon," then proceeds to introduce a current event, often outside of sports. Kornheiser is then introduced as the comedic foil to Wilbon's straight-man persona, offering a witty or absurd one-liner on whatever event Wilbon introduced. For example, in a 2004 episode, Wilbon asked Kornheiser if he had seen the "incredible photos they're sending back from Saturn," to which Kornheiser cheekily replied "…no. Are they better than the pictures I've seen from Uranus?"[24] Kornheiser's juvenile and intentional mispronunciation of the planet's name occurred several more times throughout the year, further setting a tone for *PTI* as a feel-good and light-hearted affair in comparison to cable news debate and pundit shows. Another example occurred in 2002, when Wilbon, commenting on the extreme heat in Washington, jokingly claimed he wasn't wearing pants, to which a comically horrified Kornheiser replied "what do you mean you're not wearing any pants?" Wilbon interjected "Shorts!" in an attempt to assuage viewers, with Kornheiser smiling and sarcastically asking Wilbon "why are you rubbing my leg?" to which Wilbon quickly shouted "hey, hey, hey stop that!"[25]

The airing of banter between commercial breaks, typically seen but not heard at most news desks, also gave viewers an "inside look" at the supposed authenticity of the Kornheiser/Wilbon pairing, as it demonstrated the spontaneity of their arguments as well as their willingness to work together while not holding grudges or disagreements. By showing both men as experts in sports yet prone to pranking and joking with one another on camera, *PTI* positioned its multicultural pairing as a site of triumph and achievement, an ultimate interracial male escape

from the seriousness of the news world and as a celebration of sports, jocularity, and friendship. The homosocial and juvenile nature of their banter also reified heterosexuality as an assumed norm among male sports pundits, as their quips about jostling under the table were not meant to be taken seriously and trivialized the possibility of disrupting heteronormative masculinity in sports media. The debate desk at *PTI* stood as a visual symbol of the homosocial construction of sports media, marking the medium as a place for men to relax, be themselves, and talk about the latest games, players, and teams.

Unpacking the Postracial Politics Shaping the Launch of *PTI*

PTI went to great lengths to differentiate itself from programs airing on ESPN's cable news contemporaries. One of the primary differences was the interracial pairing of the hosts, in stark contrast to the monolithic whiteness of cable and network news commentary shows. The popularity of *PTI* also reflected a postracial vision emphasizing visual diversity in terms of its staging and presentation of race on television. Following the lead of neoliberal politicians such as Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, conversations concerning race in the 1990s and early 2000s largely varied between reinforcements of the United States as a "colorblind" meritocracy and an absence of discussing racism and its enduring effects, or a "postracial" framework. Michael Omi and Howard Winant define this neoliberal perspective as a framework that "avoids…framing issues or identities racially" because "neoliberals argue that addressing social policy or political discourse overtly to matters of race simply serves to distract, or even hinder, the kind of reforms which could most directly benefit racially defined minorities."[26] Robyn Wiegman adds to this concept, noting that much of the neoliberal

dismantling of government interventionism and subversion of multicultural gains occurred during a "transformation of…visual terrain *toward* more clearly inclusive representational images, images that seemed to offer, indeed demand, recognition of an America where things, particularly in the wake of civil rights, had definitively changed."[27] Even as visual diversity expanded in films, music, and television in the 1980s and 1990s, legislative gains from the civil rights movement were being actively dismantled through a rolling back of state interventionist programs and bipartisan negative discourse toward programs such as affirmative action and other antiracist policies.

Additionally, media studies scholars argue that the uptick in minority representations on television, and on television news in particular, tended to reinforce negative tropes about minorities in popular culture, particularly stereotypes involving the hypermasculinity and stereotyped criminality of Black men. Christopher P. Campbell contends that television news creates a "mythical world in which racial harmony is the norm when seen in the broader context of newscasts that routinely include images of people of color as suspects in stories related to violent crime."[28] Herman Gray also notes that television "constituted a significant social site for shaping, defining, contesting, and representing claims about American society." While Gray does not mention sports television specifically, he labels television as a site for "constructions of Blackness and by extension appeals to race."[29] Gray details a dichotomy of television depictions of African Americans, oscillating between "poor Blacks (and Hispanics) signify[ing] a social menace that must be contained…" and "…idealized middle class Black Americans increasingly populat[ing] fictional television."[30] Despite the prevalence of negative discourses of Blackness and Black masculinity associated with excessive crime and drug usage, pervasively occupied space on television news, popular television programs such as *The Cosby Show* offered an

alternative viewpoint, depicting middle class Black family life as similar to that of the standard white sitcom family. Additionally, networks such as UPN produced several programs centering on Black families and young adults, increasing Black representation and, occasionally, challenging Black pathology narratives emanating from political spheres and producing new generations of Black television stars.

The presence of Michael Wilbon on *PTI*, then, occupies a hegemonically negotiated middle ground in these discourses governing Black masculinity and television. In contrast to negative representations of Black masculinity prevalent on television news, Wilbon carried a sterling reputation and respected image from his years as a *Washington Post* sports reporter and columnist. Wilbon's appeal as a columnist was summarized by *Quill Magazine,* who awarded him with the best sports column writing in 2001, praising Wilbon for being someone who "reaches…non-traditional readers on a daily basis…" and whose columns "provide meaningful insight into issues involving mainstream sport, but he also strays outside that sphere to cover sports issues often ignored by other columnists."[31] Comments like these from a magazine representing the Society of Professional Journalists situate Wilbon as a link between issues in sport and broader conversations about race, sports, and culture. Wilbon wrote several columns directly challenging racism in sports and society in his role as a *Post* columnist, ranging from tackling discriminatory policies in PGA-affiliated country clubs to discriminatory hiring practices in the NFL and their broader effects on race and American society.[32]

However, Wilbon's role on *PTI* upholds sports media as a site of interracial male bonding and as a site where racial grievances could be overlooked or aired without frequent references to lingering racial resentment or calls for social change. In pairing Wilbon with Kornheiser, *PTI* branded itself as culturally relevant to both Black and white male audiences. Wilbon and

Kornheiser, while occupying the same age and gender demographics, were seen by ESPN as able to appeal to the widest possible audience as opposed to just the traditionally young, affluent white male demographic presumably sought by the network (and sports television more generally). Even critics of ESPN's racial politics like Jason Whitlock, who contended that ESPN typically promoted a "…more animated, stereotypical, hip-hop" type of Black masculinity on air through personalities like Stuart Scott and Stephen A. Smith, praised Wilbon as someone who "flies in the face of that [image] because he's very professional and very talented and has to be respected."[33] Wilbon nearly always appears on *PTI* in a sport coat with either a dress shirt and tie or turtleneck, regularly sporting glasses, in contrast to the less formal, more hip-hop-inflected visual and rhetorical stylings displayed by Scott and Smith on ESPN.

Wilbon's presentation on *PTI* hearkens back to the "race man" trope for Black men, which, according to Todd Boyd, "was a civil rights-era embodiment of what today falls under the highly contested term 'role model.'"[34] This archetype also represents an extension of respectability politics, a contrast from Wilbon's frequent addressing of racial issues in his columns. *PTI* capitalized on Wilbon's image as an accomplished, thoughtful sportswriter, delinking him from hip-hop stereotypes and placing him firmly within traditional patriarchal images of respectable Black elders. *PTI,* then, was a low-stakes way to enhance visible diversity on the network that did not require ESPN to change its political positions.

Scholars have emphasized that popular discourse on race during the 1990s and early 2000s was marked by a broader American avoidance of racial conversations in favor of claims of a universal American culture, society, and experience. These efforts reinforced hegemonic cultural conceptions like meritocracy and colorblindness while simultaneously minimizing the ongoing realities of systemic racism. This avoidance of talking about ongoing racism arose in

part a backlash to various social movements emerging across the country in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, Omi and Winant write that this perspective, prevalent across television at the time of *PTI's* launch, "does not recognize the instability inherent in racial politics and identity…it treats race as something we can 'get beyond.'"[35] David Theo Goldberg links multiculturalism with a philosophy of "antiracialism," or, taking a stand "against a concept, a name, a category, a categorizing," a stand which "does not involve standing (up) against…conditions of being or living."[36] In so doing, Goldberg argues that "multiculturalism has served as a form of appeasement for those increasingly left behind as well as convenient public relations and advertising modalities for corporate interests."[37]

Jodi Melamed adds to this concept, arguing that a liberal racial paradigm "recognizes racial inequality as a problem, and it secures a liberal symbolic framework for race reform centered in abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism."[38] She adds that opposition to multiculturalism ranged from centrist and neoconservative notions of multiculturalism as "an attack on America's common culture" to progressive critiques of the philosophy as "…a kind of accommodation that replaced a focus on substantive political and economic goals with an emphasis on cultural diversity."[39] This range of criticisms reveals the layering of factors from liberal, moderate, and conservative factions, which all contributed to a fundamental altering of racial discourse in 21st century American culture. By treating racial discrimination as a problem of the past, race is made rhetorically, but not visually, invisible in popular culture, an area which included an ever-expanding and increasingly profitable sports television industry.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva echoes this critique of neoliberalism, framing it as "abstract liberalism" and identifying this as one of four tenets of color-blind racism. Specifically, Bonilla-

Silva argues that "by framing race-related issues in the language of [political and economic] liberalism, whites can appear 'reasonable' and even 'moral' while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality."[40] Bradley Jones and Roopali Mukherjee argue that a neoliberal conception of difference sees difference as "…depoliticized, relegated to the private sphere, and thus divorced from relationships of power…."[41] They also state that what they term "neoliberal multiculturalism" in the late 1990s and early 2000s "presents neoliberalism as a socially progressive politics by articulating a colorblind, cosmopolitan, post-race subject, while characterizing as 'backwards' or 'racist' those who invoke racial claims."[42]

Through ignoring issues of systemic discrimination and ongoing inequalities of opportunities, this consensus between abstract liberalism and conservative policies justifies a bipartisan refusal to address racial inequality. It also upholds certain minorities who managed to overcome long economic and political odds to achieve success as exemplar stories that serve to disprove enduring systemic discrimination. ESPN and other sports television producers reinforced this "abstract liberalism" success narrative through their promotion of individual Black pundits and commentators such as Wilbon and, later Stephen A. Smith. Here, ESPN celebrated successful minority individuals while praising the meritocratic framework of American society and professional and college sports, reinforcing a version of Coakley's "great sport myth" in the sphere of sports media.[43] And, outside of criticism from fringe voices in sports media like *Deadspin* or *Awful Announcing*, ESPN largely proceeded with its structural and systemic centering of white masculinity.

Wilbon and Kornheiser as a Model Interracial Friendship

PTI presents Kornheiser and Wilbon as a model interracial male friendship to viewers, signifying sports television's hegemonically constructed image as a bonding site across social categories. If, as Erica Chito Childs argues, "the ways that interracial couples are socially constructed within media and popular culture mirrors the social construction of race and racial groups in society," then analyzing *PTI* gives insight to the constructions of interracial male friendships on television, both inside and outside of sports media.[44] Concerning television, Catherine R. Squires demonstrates that "…news media are part of the process of racial formation and racial projects…" and that "news representations of racial groups and racial controversies can reflect current trends in racial thinking…."[45] As part of this ideological shift away from a post-WWII liberal antiracist coalition, popular culture productions such as films and television programs featured numerous scripts focusing on interracial friendships between leading male characters overcoming both personal and systemic prejudices to solve problems.[46]

This pairing of white and Black men on *PTI* is reminiscent of a feature often seen in interracial buddy cop films such as the *Lethal Weapon* franchise, starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover as reluctantly partnered detectives who are forced to solve increasingly elaborate crimes and conspiracies.[47] In this genre of film, which included other successful films like *48 Hours* and *Beverly Hills Cop*, these tensions are at once articulated, worked through, at times reversed or inverted, then, ultimately, cast aside in favor of a resolution of the greater conflict faced by the two men. In buddy cop films, racism and suspicion of the "other" are overcome through personal interaction and friendship rather than through sweeping structural reforms or changes. *PTI* indirectly referenced this genre with a segment titled "Good Cop, Bad Cop," in which

Kornheiser and Wilbon donned police caps and debated the merits of particular events, with each coming down on a different side.[48]

Deadspin referred to the Kornheiser/Wilbon pairing (perhaps mockingly) as a true "power couple" in sports media due to their tendency to dress in coordinated costumes for Halloween in a manner similar to many romantically involved couples.[49] The *Washington Times* remarked that Kornheiser and Wilbon "could be mistaken for patrons at a sports bar, co-hosts on CNN's '*Crossfire*'" or even "…a pair of bickering spouses…."[50] This allusion to Kornheiser and Wilbon symbolizing an old married couple arose in part out of the homosocial interracial bond their television pairing represented. The televised union of Kornheiser and Wilbon, then, positioned them as a sort of *Odd Couple*, two older men who had experienced and wrote about iconic sporting moments in the 1980s and 1990s from different walks of life and thus, were bound to clash. Additionally, the two represented historically aligned social groups – Kornheiser as the secular Jew from New York; Wilbon as the midwestern Black man. Their coupling, while diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and geography, further reified the boundary of sports punditry as a male space, forcing Kornheiser to fill in for various performances of femininity via his occasional appearances in drag or other feminine-coded costuming.[51]

Todd Reeser argues that interracial masculine pairings like the one featured on *PTI* "can be seen to function metonymically for a move toward a utopian world," and that these pairings show "…how America's racist origins can presumably be overcome."[52] Reeser echoes elements of multiculturalism, in which symbolic friendship and togetherness between a white and a Black man stand in for national racial harmony. Donald Bogle concurs with this sentiment, claiming that interracial male pairings in American cinema "have been wish-fulfillment fantasies for a nation that has repeatedly hoped to simplify its racial tensions," and that these pairings refuse to

"explore the complex and often contradictory dynamics of real interracial friendships."[53] Wiegman also adds that multicultural representation serves as a form of superficial racial justice, claiming that an "integrationist aesthetic works by apprehending political equality as coterminous with representational presence, thereby undermining political analyses that pivot on the exclusion, silence, or invisibility of various groups and their histories."[54]

Popular culture productions in this time frame also contributed to this practice by regularly setting films and television series depicting racism in the 1960s and earlier, situating racism as a past, mainly southern, evil isolated to the nation's history, not its present or future.[55] To this end, shows like *PTI* represent a racial utopia of sorts, with both men appearing as equals discussing sports. Omi and Winant note that in "post-civil rights" and "post-racial" perspectives on race in the United States, a "colorblind" society necessitates that "racial inequality, racial politics, and race-consciousness itself would be greatly diminished in importance, and indeed relegated to the benighted past when discrimination and prejudice ruled."[56] *PTI* reinforces this framework by reminding viewers that such a pairing was impossible in the past while simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing the less-discriminatory present. Squires notes that despite an increase in racialized inequality in the economic sphere, "the media continue to churn out films and shows that feature scores of people of color living discrimination-free lives."[57] The presence of successful figures in sports such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson who achieved significant popularity without directly taking political stances on racial issues contributed to this loose understanding of a "postracial" moment in American sports culture. Kornheiser and Wilbon's performances on *PTI* fit into this postracial framework by demonstrating interracial unity and friendship while tackling a variety of debate subjects on *PTI*.

Enacting Racial and Gender Politics Through *PTI's* Sports Debates

While the pair's racial difference was visible, it was regularly portrayed as secondary to the subject matter at hand: debates about teams, athletes, and coaches. As previously mentioned, the program deliberately billed itself as fun, lighthearted debate meant to supplement the important sports news of the day, which comprised the program that follows *PTI*, *SportsCenter*. An early example of postracialism influencing the discourse of *PTI* can be seen in *PTI's* discussion of Notre Dame University's hiring of Tyrone Willingham as its head football coach in December of 2001, becoming the first Black coach in program history. Willingham was initially passed over in favor of George O'Leary, who was forced to resign days later after his resume was revealed to contain several inaccuracies. Willingham was subsequently hired by Notre Dame, but *PTI's* debates regarding his candidacy exemplify postracial viewpoints on contemporary issues in sports.

Despite Willingham's earlier success coaching at Stanford which included a rare Rose Bowl berth for the team after the 1999 season, Wilbon stated his pessimism that Notre Dame would give "serious consideration" to hiring Willingham, arguing Notre Dame would be "scared of hiring a Black candidate" and would ignore Willingham's "impeccable" resume. Kornheiser disagreed with Wilbon, noting that Willingham's success at another prestigious academic institution would stand out to Notre Dame before arguing that "…I don't believe that in 2001, soon to be 2002, that Notre Dame will say no, because you're Black." Wilbon then quickly interjected: "They won't say that, they'll come up with another reason! He will not get serious consideration, sadly."[58] Upon O'Leary's hiring, Wilbon triumphantly asked if Kornheiser was ready to eat crow before exclaiming "I told you Notre Dame would not seriously consider a

Black coach this time around, even in 2001…DID I STAMMER?"[59] Kornheiser appeared bemused, but, days later, when Willingham was eventually hired, asked Wilbon if he would "at least admit that he was wrong on Ty Willingham and Notre Dame not hiring a Black head coach." Wilbon adamantly refused, noting that Notre Dame interviewed and courted several other white candidates for the position, and that Kornheiser could "make Notre Dame into Branch Rickey now if you want," sarcastically juxtaposing Notre Dame with the Brooklyn Dodgers executive who signed Jackie Robinson as the first Black player in Major League Baseball. An exasperated Kornheiser yelled back "but they got this guy now, and he's the right guy!"[60] Wilbon ultimately insisted that he refused to acknowledge the hiring as a huge step in the right direction for Black coaches, forcing a defeated Kornheiser to croak: "well, I tried."[61]

Here, Kornheiser echoes white postracial rhetoric, with Wilbon acting as the Black voice pointing out racial dimensions to this hiring and eventual firing of Willingham. Kornheiser's comments specifically noting the time of the hiring ("I don't believe that in 2001, soon to be 2002, that Notre Dame will say 'no' because you're Black") fall in line with notions of widespread racism as a thing of the past, and that a colorblind meritocracy ultimately would dictate Notre Dame's decision. Here, Kornheiser and Wilbon's debate about Notre Dame represents two different discourses. Wilbon's clear invocation of having "a lot of history on my side" concerning qualified Black coaches being passed over by white colleagues for major jobs represented ongoing Black activist efforts. Kornheiser's disagreement with Wilbon lionized the abstract liberal concept of a colorblind meritocracy in sports. This notion of refusing to talk directly about race and, thereby, mitigating its effects, was popular in neoliberal political philosophy, defined by Stuart Hall as a philosophy "grounded in the 'free, possessive individual,' with the state cast as tyrannical and oppressive."[62] Neoliberalism was a broad, international,

bipartisan movement which spanned administrations and eras, fueling distrust of government intervention in all matters while elevating the primacy of markets—both financial and ideological—as ideal determiners of policy and opinion.

Kornheiser's later statements of Willingham being "the right guy" for the job and lauding of Notre Dame for hiring the first Black coach in program history reinforced a white progressive view of race in 21st century America, as he optimistically heralded present opportunities over the overt discrimination of the past. Even as Wilbon approached the arguments with a clear set of data supporting him, the postracial talking points used by Kornheiser were meant to counteract and/or neutralize Wilbon's insistence that racism still lingers in major college sports. Despite Wilbon's clear criticisms of Notre Dame's institutional hiring practices, *PTI's*, and by proxy ESPN's, framing of the issue cast Notre Dame as an individual bad actor as opposed to dissecting the paucity of Black coaches in major college football jobs. This exemplifies what Adam Hodges terms the "hunting for racists" outlook of isolating racist individuals through looking for instances of explicitly racist language in their speech rather than focusing on dismantling ongoing systemic racism across American society.[63]

A second relevant example of postracial framing on *PTI* occurred in 2004 after the infamous Indiana Pacers/Detroit Pistons brawl, colloquially known as "The Malice at the Palace." A fight between players escalated when a Pistons fan threw a beer at Indiana Pacer Ron Artest, who then entered the stands to confront the fan, with several punches exchanged between players and fans. The aftermath of the brawl culminated in lengthy suspicions of the players involved and the NBA instituting a reactionary age limit on incoming draftees, essentially forcing players to spend at least one year playing NCAA basketball. Several current Black NBA players, most notably Jermaine O'Neal, argued that the move was racially motivated and

targeted young Black players. NBA commissioner David Stern defended himself and the NBA vociferously against these accusations, claiming that he had no problem with younger players, but wanted the age restriction, in part, to discourage kids from "planning their lives around basketball, because it's not a very good thing to do."[64] When discussing the age limit on *PTI,* Wilbon echoed this colorblind sentiment, arguing that "the policy was a good idea because it would send a different message to hundreds of young Black men who are operating under the disastrous misapprehension that they too are headed for the NBA and therefore don't need to concentrate on school."[65]

Wilbon's argument here utilized racial uplift rhetoric, justifying a coded anti-Black racial reaction by the NBA under the guise of improving educational opportunities for potential Black NBA prospects. Wilbon's statements on *PTI* legitimated Stern and the NBA's insistence that the age limit was not about race, but rather focused on bettering both the quality of the NBA's play and the individual lives of their predominantly Black prospect pool. Furthermore, in siding against the opinion of several Black NBA players, Wilbon distanced himself from the younger generation of Black athletes commonly associated by NBA critics with the negative aspects of hip-hop culture. This distinction itself not only altered Wilbon's image as an advocate of NBA players (an image previously bolstered by his co-authoring of Charles Barkley's autobiography,) but paralleled a broader discursive shift toward discussing race in culturally coded terms. Here, hip hop and "gangsta rap" culture became a stand-in for popular antipathy toward Black masculinity, trends present in both media and political discourses. Wilbon's motivations for focusing on deemphasizing basketball in favor of education may have emanated from a different place than the white paternalism of Stern and the NBA. Nevertheless, the remarks were

inseparable from broader condemnations and seemingly gave a multicultural approval to this restriction of younger Black identity in the NBA.

Another notable example of racism being a central topic on *PTI* occurred when the hosts discussed the possibility of Rush Limbaugh owning an NFL team in a 2009 episode. Wilbon dismissed the possibility of Limbaugh's viability as an NFL owner by contrasting Limbaugh's history of anti-Black racism on air with the fact that nearly 70 percent of NFL players are Black, suggesting that players might refuse to play for him. Wilbon specifically stated that Limbaugh is "universally reviled by Black people in this country, and justifiably so, based on his public pronouncements, constantly…saying things that are offensive." Kornheiser agreed, claiming that "we are out of the Michael Jordan era of everybody wears sneakers,' and we are back in the Jim Brown era of social activism," drawing approval from Wilbon. Both pundits then agreed that this was an interesting moment, with Kornheiser saying that "there is a block of athletes who are willing to say something political for the first time in 30 years," and Wilbon adding that "the silence that was there in the 80s and the 90s, there's a roar now, it's been a while."[66]

While Wilbon vehemently decried the racism of Limbaugh, the lack of diversity of NFL ownership remained unexamined by the two pundits in favor of pouncing on this individual instance of overt racism. The condemnation of Limbaugh as an individual racist actor focused more specifically on how he would be received by the predominantly Black players. This critique of Limbaugh's potential ownership in one sense highlighted the disparity between the racial demographics and political leanings of owners and players. However, it also avoids the reality that many NFL owners might have politics similar to Limbaugh's, but do not want to be associated with him. For example, around this same time, Colts Owner Jim Irsay went on record

vowing "to vote against" Limbaugh despite the fact that in 2009, the same year as this segment, 70 percent of NFL Owners' political contributions went to Republicans.[67]

This emphasis on postracial rhetoric seen through these examples from *PTI* appeals to dominant attitudes toward race at the turn of the millennium. *PTI*, then, is an extension of the interracial male bonding narrative prevalent across films, television, and literature from the 1980s to the 2000s. In its emphasis on the close (and genuine) friendship between Kornheiser and Wilbon, *PTI* exemplify what Wiegman terms as popular cultural productions' ability to "transform[s] the historical contestations between Black and white men into the image of democratic fraternity, marking America as an exclusive masculine realm."[68]

The closeness of the two men was seen not just in their frequent laughter and smiling in the midst of occasionally heated sports debate, but also in their interactions outside of *PTI*. In an interview with the *Sports Business Journal*, Wilbon confirmed that his on-air chemistry with Kornheiser was not just an act for the cameras, remarking that their golfing partners would frequently compare their banter on the golf course with their on-air rants. Wilbon specifically claimed that his friendship with Kornheiser "existed long before 'PTI' with much more (four-letter-words) on the golf course." This admission led him to sarcastically quip that he and Kornheiser "joke all the time about an HBO version of the show."[69] Here, the reference to HBO's penchant for profanity and looser censorship restrictions than mainstream television referenced that a certain mainstream, more corporate image was desired (and necessitated by FCC regulations) by ESPN. *PTI* served dominant hegemonically constructed cultural interests while adding a newer, distinctively multicultural wrinkle into traditional conceptions of sports journalism and debate as a markedly male domain.

The program's clear focus on interracial friendship over conflict represents what Stuart Hall terms a "preferred" or "dominant" reading of *PTI* as a cultural text.[70] Accounts of the show's founding corroborated this interpretation, noting that the two had worked together at the *Post* since 1980, with Kornheiser noting that early airings of the show in the *Post's* newsroom had employees assuming that the pair were physically present in the newsroom engaging in their trademark banter.[71] While the good-natured commentary and banter reinforced a desired image of racial harmony, the narrowing of debate topics to avoiding critiques of structural racism reinforces the framings of abstract liberalism and colorblindness pervasive in political and cultural discourses of the 2000s.

Keeping Sport Punditry a Boy's Club: *PTI* and Gender

Even as the program used its pairing to reach viewers across racial demographics, *PTI* represented ESPN's broader pursuit of attracting male viewers while largely ignoring female viewers. For example, while discussing Wimbledon in 2009, Wilbon and guest host Bob Ryan commented on a report that Wimbledon officials "scheduled *attractive* unseeded players on the prestigious Centre Court while less attractive top seeded players, such as Dinara Safina and Serena Williams were scheduled on the side courts." Even as both hosts noted the unfairness of this practice, they also reinforced sexism by expressing shock that Serena Williams was not placed with the attractive players.[72] This example highlights the limitations of discussing sexism in sports media, as even condemnations of structural sexism from nominally progressive figures still objectified female athletes. *PTI's* take on the issue fell in line with other takes in the sports media landscape. Fellow male ESPN pundit and *Page 2* columnist LZ Granderson commented

on the obvious sexism in this practice, but argued that such a strategy was good if it "can help draw in fans, increase ratings, and thus make the Women's Tennis Association more money," adding that "…as long as the players themselves respect he game and carry themselves as professional athletes and not sex kittens, I don't see the harm."[73] The framework was even defended by tennis great—and gender equality icon—Martina Navratilova, who told *The New York Times* that these type of rumors are "'either exaggerated or made up.'"[74] With the exception of voices like Dave Zirin at *The Nation,* who cited relevant scholarship disproving the "sex sells women's sports" hypothesis, *PTI's* reinforcement of sexism and excessive focus on the physical attractiveness of female athletes suggests that the program did not just endorse the idea of a postracial America, but also a post-sexist United States.[75]

A later episode in 2017 featured Kornheiser and Wilbon debating the merits of male tennis legend John McEnroe's claim that Serena Williams couldn't beat a majority of male tennis players. Wilbon abandoned his usual joviality when discussing the possibility of Williams beating her male counterparts, exclaiming "Why is this an issue? Are people so stupid that they have to pursue their agendas more than they have to look at reality?" He went on to argue that other great female tennis players were refusing to protest or question McEnroe's stance, ranting that "people…feel that there's a need for their political correctness to ruin the day," imploring the same people to "shut up."[76] Kornheiser rejected the question as being fundamentally flawed, claiming that men's and women's tennis were "different sports." Wilbon angrily closed down the debate segment, ranting about people who "aren't dealing with the reality of sport, and physicality, and physiology."[77]

Here, *PTI's* hosts explicitly argued for gender segregation in sports, focusing on judging the merits and abilities of male and female athletes through separate spheres. Regardless of

intention and their acknowledgement of players like Williams' accomplishments, Kornheiser and Wilbon denigrated the abilities of female athletes and contributed to an ongoing trivialization of women's sports in comparison to men's sports. Whereas Wilbon previously came out vehemently against the racism inherent in Notre Dame's football hiring practices, his reinforcement of sexism in sports media thought demonstrates a hierarchy in the industry, as racist transgressions from athletes and sports executives were seen as more serious than sexist transgressions. Unlike the typically coded terms used to discuss race on these programs, Wilbon's call to look at supposed physiological realities of sport separating men and women demonstrates a commitment to more explicit sexism, bypassing any euphemisms and upholding sport as a masculine realm. These performances on *PTI* reinforce sexism in sports television. Or, as Darcy Plymire terms, *PTI* is a text that "reproduce[s] ideologies that affirm presumed sexual differences and inequalities of social power."[78]

Wiegman also argues concerning the intersectionality of race and gender that greater representations of interracial male duos "…level the threat of Black male challenge to white supremacist power by reasserting, through the specter of bourgeois and heterosexual conformity, the patriarchal preconditions that have historically structured the illusion of coherence underwriting modern 'man.'"[79] Programs like *PTI* forge bonds of commonality like gender, age, and sports knowledge to symbolically erase female sports participation, particularly excluding the possibility of a female sports pundit invading this genre of television. In focusing on this pairing representing interracial male unity, *PTI* reinforced ESPN's expectations for their audience with the program: a pair capable of appealing to various segments of the male demographic that love sports. Through commentary and debates such as these aforementioned examples, *PTI* simultaneously acknowledged and credited female athletes while discrediting

their abilities and/or mediated significance in comparison to their male peers. In this intersection of social categories, racial unity and representation was prioritized more by ESPN than gender unity in their ultimate goal of capturing viewers.

While television critics frequently praised the jovial nature of the program, the concept of *PTI* as part of a larger boy's club in sports media occasionally drew negative attention. For example, in early 2010, Kornheiser was suspended by ESPN for two weeks for derogatory comments toward fellow ESPN employee Hannah Storm on his own radio show. Specifically, Kornheiser criticized the outfit worn by Storm on a broadcast, claiming that, among other things, Storm was wearing "a horrifying, horrifying outfit today" accentuated by "a Catholic School plaid skirt…way too short for somebody in her 40s or maybe early 50s by now."[80] While the offending remarks were not part of *PTI* in any direct form or fashion, Kornheiser was suspended for two weeks from all of his functions at the network—including *PTI*.

The incident, while seemingly an outlier for an otherwise highly respected pundit, revealed the entrenched sexism in the sports television industry, even when the network swiftly acted to suspend Kornheiser from all network programming. While he apologized and deemed his comments wrong, he also suggested that it wasn't the first time he had crossed the line, and it was unlikely to be the last. Specifically, he categorized the comment was "sort of what I do, and I'm sorry for it."[81] Storm reflected on the ensuing controversy, noting that "the episode also unleashed a lot of voices out there on the internet," recalling that she "received really nasty e-mails, really hateful stuff about my clothes…even voice mails."[82] Kornheiser was suspended previously in 2002 for an unrelated incident in which he used his radio show to voice criticisms of various ESPN executives for firing employees that were friends of Kornheiser.[83]

The ability of Kornheiser to withstand serious backlash for engaging in misogynistic discourse against a fellow ESPN employee reveals several important facts about his and *PTI's* standing within both ESPN and the sport television industry. Kornheiser's non-apologetic statement that such comments are "sort of what I do" represents the more dangerous aspects of relying on punditry as a centerpiece of programming. Kornheiser's decision to denigrate a female colleague's fashion choices and age represents implicit and explicit sexism targeting women in sports broadcasting.[84] The incident is made even more contradictory and strange when juxtaposed with Kornheiser's frequent crossings of gender boundaries on *PTI,* which often see him cross-dressing or appearing in other outlandish costumes. Further separating Kornheiser from the imagined and often assumed hypermasculinity of sports media members is the fact that Kornheiser never played professional sports, instead building his reputation as an acerbic commentator willing to mock his own lack of athletic prowess. While other personalities at ESPN had backgrounds as professional athletes, Kornheiser's performance of masculinity opened up another space, using the debate desk as a metaphorical playing field to assert one's dominance over a competitor.

PTI's Enduring Popularity, Further Differentiation from Political Punditry, and Convergence

PTI immediately drew significantly more viewers than the program it replaced on ESPN; a more traditional interview-based news show called *Up Close with Roy Firestone*.[85] The improvement in ratings over a standard interview program reproducing basics of sports news signaled a change in viewers' programming preferences at ESPN. Specifically, in an era of increasingly available information, ESPN viewers tuned into *PTI* for commentary and a more

comedic tone toward current events, while more serious news broken by ESPN found a home on programs like *Outside the Lines.* This strategy by the network, and by Mark Shapiro in particular, amplifies the element of "infotainment" seen on *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight* years earlier, while segmenting news and commentary under the ESPN brand. By moving these highly respected veterans of print columns to a different genre of television, ESPN merged fans of print, radio, comedy, reality television, political debates and newscasts into a half-hour viewing block.

In a 2002 review of *PTI, The Sporting News* praised the innovative format of the program as "the true star," singling out the displaying of topics "like web pages, indexed so we know what's next."[86] This invocation of the Internet as an influential factor for PTI speaks further to Jenkins' idea of "convergence culture," as the increased agency of consuming news stories provided by the Internet influenced the presentation of *PTI*.[87] This increasing prevalence of web-based styling on television also echoed the efforts of ESPN to expand its branding to the Internet, as its website, ESPN.com, began to feature the occasional column from both Kornheiser and Wilbon.[88] In addition to their writings for the *Washington Post* and *ESPN.com,* both men published an abbreviated but original version of *PTI* occasionally for *ESPN the Magazine* discussing contemporary issues, further illustrating the power that the *PTI* format, the individual pundits, and the program's brand wielded for ESPN across multiple media.

The Sporting News went on to praise *PTI* for being "honest/legit," as well as for featuring "working journalists who actually face the athletes they discuss." Perhaps more significantly, the review compared *PTI* positively to cable's many political debate shows, claiming that "unlike argumentarians on *Crossfire,* these co-hosts aren't programmed to disagree."[89] Kornheiser mused that *PTI* offered "the best elements of *Meet the Press* and *The Gong Show,*" referencing the journalistic careers of the co-hosts while also noting their refusal to conform to traditional

standards of televisual journalism and their predilection for engaging in witty and often absurdist discourse.[90] *Variety* lauded *PTI* as "a rapid-fire sports talker more fun than the games it skewers," praising Kornheiser and Wilbon as "a dream team, combining knowledge, sarcasm, class, wit and a little tension to make up for the industry's other blowhards who mouth off way too much."[91] Here, *PTI's* lighter brand of sports punditry carries more appeal than the outrage discourse of many talk radio hosts on television. The concept of the show being as entertaining as the sports they discussed seemingly validates ESPN's earlier focus on pursuing "infotainment" to supplement its news and live event coverage. This emphasis on engaging and entertaining discussion added to the universal appeal of the show, inviting in non-sports fans.

The program ran its pilot episode a month after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, at a time when calls for national unity remained high. Here, sports served not just as a reinforcement of state ideologies in a moment of cultural and political crisis, but also as a form of escapism. This escapist fantasy, christened the "great sport myth" by Jay Coakley, posits that sport is free of any negative outside political and cultural influences, and that its purity and meritocratic ideals remain untainted.[92] *PTI*, by highlighting an interracial duo debating sports in a lighthearted manner, upheld sport as a site of unity over division, eschewing the complex racial, gendered, and classed inequalities pervading both historical and modern sports in favor of the popular fantasy of sports as escapist entertainment.[93]

In a piece covering PTI's tenth anniversary in *The Washington Post,* Erik Rydholm reminisced on his original thoughts about *PTI*. He recalled thinking that "if you do this type of show right, it can be on for an awful long time…" and that having "two really smart people, with chemistry, talking about something that's relevant, had the potential, if done right, to last."[94] Rydholm's optimism for the project highlights many of the traditional expectations for pundit-

driven shows, including intelligence, chemistry, and relevance of topics. This reflection demonstrates that it was not just expertise in their fields that set apart Wilbon and Kornheiser, but also their performance and ability to caricature themselves. Tony Reali noted the show's unique ability to blend seriousness and absurdity, recalling that Rydholm paradoxically "demanded thought…in a sports conversation based on opinion" while also quipping that Rydholm "saw Kornheiser in a turban, earrings, and a dress."[95]

Further differentiating *PTI* from its cable contemporaries was the presence of Reali, affectionately known as "Stat-Boy," going through a segment of "Errors and Omissions" near the end of each episode, letting Kornheiser and Wilbon know what mistakes were made throughout the course of the broadcast. This tone of jocularity reflected not just a marked departure from the often-contentious exchanges of political debate programs like *Crossfire* and *The McLaughlin Group,* but also emphasized the closeness and friendship of Kornheiser and Wilbon. This also suggested that the show cared about accuracy even as it was making fun of its own occasional inaccuracies. Reali pointed out that political hosts on television were "afraid to acknowledge that they got something wrong," and that Kornheiser and Wilbon "never, ever shied away from being called out on national TV for a mistake they made."[96] Rather, Reali noted, that the two pundits "loved being able to pound it to the other guy that 'you got this one wrong,'" reflecting the confrontational and hypermasculine nature of sports and its influence on sports television, while also implying that they still care about accuracy in their debates, perhaps more so than partisan political programs on cable news like *Crossfire* and *Hannity and Colmes*.[97] Additionally, the heightened degree of self-awareness on the part of its hosts assures the audience that disagreements between Kornheiser and Wilbon are secondary to their friendship.

The ability to admit to errors and omissions in discussions stands in stark contrast to political pundits, who often engage in binary rhetoric, performing a zero-sum-game of sorts, giving each argument the aura of life-or-death seriousness. This self-deprecation from Kornheiser, Wilbon, and Reali on *PTI* distinguishes sports punditry from political punditry, essentially implying that anything said on these programs was not meant to be taken with the same seriousness as matters of national security or policy positions argued by cable news pundits on other networks. Additionally, this real-time information availability foreshadows the widespread expansion of online sports sites and cellphones. Kornheiser contended in an interview with CNN that he and Wilbon were used to having facts checked and corrected from their time at the *Post*, and that they knew "we were bound to get a few wrong…we thought it would be good for the audience that we acknowledged we got something wrong."[98] When confronted with the idea that factual analysis is often not a prerequisite for sports analysts, Kornheiser countered:

> when you put yourself out there as an expert, and the people you're trying to attract are people who want to do the very show you're doing- guys standing around, sitting around arguing with each other over sports- if you make a mistake, that lights up like a flare in the middle of the night. You've just gotta correct that, or else they're gonna say 'Well, why do these dopes have a show? I can go out there and I can be just as good as them.[99]

Kornheiser's concept of being corrected by everyday viewers of the show sparks several important ideas concerning *PTI*. First, it recasts sports expertise as a more readily available knowledge than political pundits possessed, and a subject that was more widely discussed by predominantly male viewers across the country. Second, the concern over having accurate opinions not only reflects traditional newsroom ethics, but also further contrasted with the increasingly partisan programming and commentary powering other cable networks like Fox News and MSNBC. Third, it projected more humility upon the show's debates, linking their

commentary to those of everyday sports fans rather than as some sort of "special knowledge" traditionally associated with political punditry.[100] In both appearing different from cable news pundits in the name of finding an "everyman" image while also paying close attention to detail in the show's arguments and fact-checking, *PTI* struck a delicate balance between the bombast of shows like *Crossfire* and the detailed nature of programs like *SportsCenter*. This ability to admit to inaccuracies furthered the genial image of *PTI*, allowing it to connect with viewers potentially turned off by the outrage discourse and absolutism emanating from political punditry.

PTI ultimately became one of ESPN's most successful original programs and found fans far outside the expected young male demographic. While the show was different from other programs at the time of its launch, a 2011 internal review from ESPN nevertheless noted that, according to their research, "debate shows such as 'Pardon the Interruption" and 'Around the Horn'" are "repellent" to female viewers.[101] In classifying debate programming as being repellent to female fans, ESPN used its data to further gender their programming and reify notions of sport media commentary as a male arena. PTI's popularity eventually extended beyond the realm of sport media junkies and habitual watchers of ESPN into other cultural spheres. Famous fans of *PTI* included Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the latter of whom invited Kornheiser and Wilbon to golf with him.[102] The fact that *PTI* was popular with both Bush and Obama further reinforces the argument that the show echoes a neoliberal, postracial, multicultural consensus. Kornheiser was even the inspiration for a short-lived CBS sitcom titled *Listen Up!* starring Jason Alexander as the sportswriter protagonist whose life and career clearly echoed Kornheiser's own experiences.[103] To date, *PTI* has won three Sports Emmy awards for outstanding studio show in 2009, 2016, and 2017.[104]

Even as technology and delivery methods of cable television changed, the popularity of *PTI* did not. As ESPN began to distribute its original television content online with ESPN360.com in 2007, they noted that *PTI* clips would be available in addition to live sports coverage, demonstrating the importance the network placed on this pundit-driven program.[105] ESPN's partnership with other conglomerations such as AOL led to *PTI* having segments of the show available online to further their reach into the multimedia landscape.[106] *Sports Business Journal* noted that in 2013, when streaming popularity rose and traditional viewership declined on cable networks, live TV viewership of *PTI* and *Around the Horn* declined, but their numbers of streaming viewers on platforms such as WatchESPN and DVR recordings increased.[107] Furthermore, podcast audio recordings of the show proved to be immensely popular, as downloads of the *PTI* podcast routinely ranked at or near the top of ESPN's Podcenter downloads.[108] The popularity of the program across multiple media platforms indicated its ability to transcend television, and further cemented the pundit-driven debate genre as a successful formula for television channels like ESPN to expand into other platforms of sports media.

PTI allows ESPN to both be a part of the rancorous and deliberately polarizing political media trend of debate and analysis programming while also propping itself up as a more accurate, less contentious version of these programs. Therefore, ESPN presents sports talk as a space simultaneously linked to and separate from political media, courting the same male audiences but doing so in a more universal fashion than the hyperpartisan tactics of Fox News or MSNBC. *PTI* allows ESPN to replicate postracial and neoliberal values by focusing its discussions on individuals and teams rather than on structural issues of racial and gender inequality that persist in sports.

Conclusion

PTI introduced a number of important innovations to the televised sport debate format such as a running timer for debate topics and a visual rundown of these topics on the side of the screen. It also drew on conventions from political pundit programs, namely by elevating respected print columnists to television pundits who delivered incisive opinions on topical issues. Kornheiser and Wilbon brought the characters of print columnists to a larger television audience, replicating the collegial feel of ESPN's own *The Sports Reporters* while adding a game-like confrontational feel to the conversations and covering topics at a much quicker pace.

Where *PTI* stands out most from its cable contemporaries in televised punditry, however, is in its presentation and marketization of an interracial relationship. By featuring Black and white male contemporaries arguing about issues in sports but doing so in a deliberately good-natured and entertaining manner, *PTI* reflected and reproduced many contemporary discourses and attitudes governing race relations in the United States. Specifically, *PTI*, in highlighting an interracial male friendship, reflected a postracial emphasis on visual multiculturalism, in which racism was viewed as a problem of the past that had largely been transcended, and that the solution to ongoing racial strife laid in forging personal friendships and connections while avoiding government interventions into racial inequality. Subsequently, any focus on ongoing forms of systemic and structural racism in this postracial context were deemed as attempts at race-based agitation, evidenced by conservative critics of Wilbon accusing him playing "the race card" or hit with accusations of "reverse racism." These critics ranged from individual pundits such as Rush Limbaugh to the conservative media watchdog group Media Research Center.[109] The adoption of a sort of "era of good feelings" toward interracial male pairings aimed at

stressing commonality over differences further enmeshed PTI within broader conversations about race in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The unexpected and continual success of *PTI*, then, signifies that both ESPN and their audience supported this postracial framework. This emphasis on co-equal representation of white and Black sports pundits stood in stark contrast to the whiteness of political punditry on cable television, but also reinforced the presumed maleness of the pundit across genres. As a site of struggle for power and meaning making, *PTI* represents a negotiated settlement of sorts, where hegemonically constructed notions of race, gender, and sporting culture were juxtaposed by highlighting an interracial male friendship as the means of conquering racism in sports and sport media. The popularity and accrued cultural capital of *PTI* is another example of ESPN's discursive power in the arenas of sports media, race, and culture. John Fiske defines discursive power exercised through television as "the power to make common sense of a class-based sense of the real…" also contending that it is the "hiddenness" of this power "…that enables it to present itself as common sense, as an objective, innocent reflection of the real."[110] In the case of *PTI,* a seemingly innocent reflection on interracial bonding wielded discursive power to reinforce outside sentiments that racism was mostly conquered in the post-civil rights era.

Additionally, *PTI* reflected the belief that sport punditry, like sports more generally, remained a "boy's club" off limits to women. And while the debates on *PTI* were widely praised for their comedic timing and wittiness, ESPN's subsequent pundit debate programs represented a shift in tone toward more outrage discourse and racial tension, reflecting upcoming movements in political and social discourses in the later 2000s and 2010s through movements like the Tea Party's racialized opposition to the Obama administration. In the following years, a spiritual successor to *PTI*, *First Take,* emerged at ESPN, featuring pundits that more directly reflected the

bombast and hyperbole of political media and discourse in the 2010s- Skip Bayless and Stephen A. Smith. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, *First Take's* interracial pairing ratcheted up the intensity of their debates, abandoning the concept of a buddy cop comedy in favor of a WWE-style daily, multi-hour showdown which reinforced stereotypes of racialized masculinity.

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CHAPTER 3

"EMBRACE DEBATE": *FIRST TAKE*, COMMODIFYING RACIAL TENSIONS, AND HYPERMASCULINITY ON TV PUNDITRY

> These guys are playing the role of 'journalists' with 'sources' the way Sgt. Slaughter pretended to be a soldier for the WWF. They make a living cutting what are basically pro wrestling promos all morning, every morning, and then we in the media scoop up their nonsense and repackage it as 'CAN YOU BELIEVE WHAT SKIP AND STEPHEN A. SAID THIS TIME?!' Of course I can.
>
> -Jack Moore, *GQ*[1]

Introduction

Building off the success of *Pardon the Interruption*, EPSN expanded its original programming, creating a show called *Cold Pizza* which eventually evolved—or devolved, depending on one's perspective—into *First Take* (2007-). Departing from the feel-good multicultural friendship aesthetic of *PTI*, *First Take* instead found success by directly emulating the style of *The McLaughlin Group*, where "discussions were fast-paced and extremely short on both attributed information and contextual nuance…" and "panelists were quick to personalize their criticism of one another and insult each other's manhood whenever the opportunity arose."[2] *First Take* also echoed elements of ESPN's *The Sports Reporters* by featuring voices associated with newspaper columns from disparate parts of the country. As part of an important 2012 re-branding, *First Take* paired widely reviled polemicist Skip Bayless, an older, white sports newspaper columnist originally from Oklahoma, with Stephen A. Smith, a slightly younger Black reporter, radio host, and native New Yorker with a similarly polarizing reputation among consumers of sports media.

First Take's shift in format from a more wide-ranging morning news show to a permanent debate between Bayless and Smith occurred during a time of increased racial tension

in the Obama era, an era marked by white conservatism lashing out against the Obama administration, greater minority visibility, and an imagined threat to whiteness. From 2012-2016, *First Take* used this pairing of Smith and Bayless to package and court implicit racial tension between the two panelists by engaging in heated debates about current issues in sports, often along racial lines. *First Take* also relied on the prevalence of outrage discourse in sports punditry, selling this racial tension between Bayless and Smith as a calling card of the program, even as the discussions on air frequently focused more directly to sports. I contend that Bayless stands in as a symbol of this white male resentment, with Smith countering as a representative of stereotypes of Black anger and hypermasculinity constructed by conservative media pundits in the post-civil rights era.

To that end, this chapter conducts a close reading of *First Take's* treatment of two popular athletes: LeBron James and Tim Tebow. Both James and Tebow occupied a large percentage of show topics in the early days of the Bayless/Smith pairing. I argue that James and Tebow respectively stood in for popular discourses on Blackness and whiteness. More specifically, Bayless' effusive praise for Tebow and his often-scathing criticism of James are full of racially coded language conveying a white condemnation of Blackness found similarly on news commentaries criticizing contemporary Black masculinity on cable news. Conversely, Smith's defense of James and frequent excoriations of Tebow act as foils to Bayless' racially coded invective, while reproducing stereotypes about Black masculinity, in particular the trope of the "angry Black man."

Following a thorough analysis of the Black/white binaries and racial tensions present in the program's treatment of James and Tebow, I conclude this chapter by examining three notable controversies surrounding *First Take*, interpreting them as markers of how ESPN's pundit shows

responded to racial and gender controversies in the Obama era. By looking at instances which challenge postracialism and enforce male privilege, I demonstrate that ESPN tolerates and courts provocative pundits on *First Take* to pursue ratings gains, but ultimately enforces certain expectations of their pundits' decorum, drawing lines in a reactive, rather than in a proactive, manner to avoid any negative associations with explicitly racist or sexist rhetoric. I further postulate that these metaphorical lines and standards are not produced internally but, in a manner similar to their trends and arcs in programming, reflect external cues influencing discourse on race and gender. This situates both *First Take* and ESPN as larger cogs in an ideological media apparatus situating sports punditry on television as a bastion of racialized masculinity, trading on popular stereotypes of both white and Black masculinity to maximize profits and viewership.

"Forging New Highways of Sports Entertainment": Origins and Construction of *First Take*

As ESPN acquired the rights to broadcast more live sports, it also expanded its range of programming to include various news shows and original programming. Mark Shapiro, an executive at ESPN, founded ESPN Original Entertainment (EOE) in 2001. EOE allowed Shapiro and ESPN to develop a wide range of programming ranging to compliment news programs like *SportsCenter* and *Outside the Lines*, in addition to live sports events. EOE's forays into sport entertainment projects included *Pardon the Interruption,* the game shows *Around the Horn* and *Stump the Schwab,* and scripted films and television series about sports. Shapiro proclaimed that one of the network's missions in developing EOE programming in the 2000s was to "forge new highways of sports entertainment."[3] As a part of this overarching goal of the network, ESPN developed *First Take* in 2007 as an alternative and supplement to *SportsCenter*.

Originally titled *Cold Pizza* in 2003, the show, which ran on ESPN2, centered on various sports media personalities discussing contemporary issues in the world of sports in a relatively informal setting. Travis Vogan describes *Cold Pizza* and, eventually *First Take*, as "a morning news program inspired by NBC's *Today* and ABC's *Good Morning America* that combined sports updates with reports on music, fashion, and culture."[4] Indeed, James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales write that ESPN's initial hopes for *Cold Pizza* were for the show to "satisfy all of a typical viewer's informational needs and serve as a one-stop-shopping experience for two hours live each day…" hopefully matching viewers' interests in "the news, politics, and pop culture of the day."[5] This focus on blending sport with entertainment, previously explored through *PTI* and many ESPN2 programs like *SportsNight,* remained prevalent throughout the 2000s and early 2010s at the network, signaling ESPN's desire to potentially broaden its viewership beyond the realm of dedicated sports fans to include casual viewers.

Cold Pizza was cancelled by ESPN in 2007 due to low ratings. Foreshadowing its eventual transformation into *First Take,* however, were series of twenty-minute debate segment on the program titled *First and Ten,* which featured Skip Bayless and *Denver Post* columnist Woody Paige arguing about topical sports issues in heated and animated tones. Paige was a veteran of ESPN's popular debate game show *Around the Horn,* and Bayless had experience as a columnist, radio host, and occasional guest host for *The Jim Rome Show.* The debate segments proved to be popular, leading to a 25 percent increase in ratings and even allowing *First and Ten* to air as a stand-alone program in the afternoons starring Bayless.[6] This occurred after the cancellation of *Cold Pizza,* signaling the emerging appeal of sports debate on television. *Cold Pizza* eventually rebranded itself as *First Take* in 2007. However, the program did not start off as

a solid multi-hour block of debates between Bayless and Smith, initially continuing to blend debate segments with commentary and other features.[7]

The poor ratings for *Cold Pizza*, especially in comparison to the ratings garnered by its successor *First Take,* demonstrate ESPN's failure in creating a male-centric morning variety program targeting the wide audiences reached by other morning programs on network television. In switching to a debate-centric model mimicking the style and format of sports talk radio and *Pardon the Interruption,* ESPN reified their expectations of capturing a primarily male audience with its programming, speaking to the ongoing realities of audience segmentation in the narrowcasting era. Lawrence Wenner argues that non-playing issues such as "trade gossip, injury reports, pregame hype and postgame analysis," all of which compose a large portion of *First Take's* subject matter, increased in popularity as sport media expanded, filling a daily need for sports information even when games were not being played.[8] Within this context, general interest variety programs are deemed less appealing to male viewers than all-sport debate programs, in which the hosts sought to prove their masculinity and their sporting acumen by besting their opponent in debates and shouting down the opposition.

Then-*First Take* Producer Jamie Horowitz revealed in an interview that ESPN "focus grouped" the program to viewers "and realized pretty quickly that viewers wanted debate…In particular, they wanted to see Skip [Bayless] debate."[9] The rhetorical style of Skip Bayless, one of the show's original contributors from the *Cold Pizza* era, contributed greatly to its tendency to touch on hot-button issues and opinions. Bayless carried with him a history of performing an outspoken, polemical, and provocative persona through his career. For example, Bayless wrote a book in which he mentioned a rumor that legendary Cowboys quarterback Troy Aikman was gay, a sentiment which angered Aikman.[10] Bayless' penchant for making controversial

statements and courting negative publicity led to widespread scorn and hatred from athletes, and even a physical assault at the hands of a Dallas Cowboys player in 1991.[11] A 2013 *Washington Post* profile christened Bayless "the most hated man in sports." The article noted that Bayless' Twitter feed was full of death threats and users encouraging him to commit suicide.[12] Bayless' notoriety as an antagonistic voice in sports media, first honed as a Dallas-based newspaper columnist and also as a radio host, led many viewers to direct rage at Bayless' outlandish and deliberately provocative takes on sports issues. Bayless also had additional background as a radio host of AM 1310 "The Ticket" in Dallas, reflecting Chapter 1's connection between the polemic invective of radio hosts and print columnists and the provocative performances of sports pundits on television.

Smith inspired similar disdain from his critics, both in the media and among viewers. For many years, Smith cultivated an image as an outspoken personality as both a writer with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and as the host of his own talk show on ESPN, *Quite Frankly with Stephen A. Smith* (2005-2007). Smith's penchant for high-volume ranting had earned him the derisive nickname "Screamin' A. Smith" years earlier.[13] Former ESPN executive Mark Shapiro described Smith as someone who was "Ringing the bell" during his participation in roundtable discussions. "People like him [Smith] and dislike him, but they still watch him," he added. Shapiro summarized Smith's importance to the network: "These days, it's hard to find a talent who strikes a chord that way… Polarization is a commodity."[14] Shapiro's comments reveal that ESPN viewed Smith's (and also Bayless's) polarizing comments and personas as marketable assets that could turn *First Take* into a ratings winner. In a 2019 profile for *The Ringer*, Bryan Curtis argued that Smith's greatest strength as a pundit is "that he makes us suspend our disbelief that every team on planet Earth could be part of his personal psychodrama."[15] This imaging of

entertainment trumping Smith's sports knowledge and even authenticity of emotion hint at the irony and self-awareness embedded in a program like *First Take*, whose panelists seemingly understand that the performative element of this punditry is even more important than the content or result of a particular argument. Similar to the bloviating monologues of Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Chris Matthews, a successful pundit's style often trumped the substance of their diatribes, in both sports and political television.

The negative reputation of each pundit, combined with the prevalence of outrage discourse emanating from the political media sphere, created a space for a show like *First Take* to achieve success in the sports media landscape. A 2012 *Los Angeles Times* profile of Smith and Bayless detailed preparations for a *First Take* episode, revealing that discussion topics were often posed to the pair of pundits prior to shooting episodes, and then the ones which sparked the most disagreements were ultimately selected.[16] While seemingly a standard practice, this concept of manufacturing outrage and dissent from pundits demonstrates not just the popularity of disagreement and semi-staged debate as programming features, but also the power of *First Take* to uphold certain stories and athletes as newsworthy and controversial figures.

This can be seen in *First Take's* selection of debate topics, which often center on historicizing current players and ranking them among the all-time greats of their respective sports. Hyperbole and grandiosity govern these conversations, as a focus on secondhand reports, rumors, and abstract concepts such as the amount of pressure faced by players often obscures tactical or technical details of the sports themselves. A sampling of debate segments from a 2018 show include: the greatness (both current and historical) of LeBron James, where top free agents will land, how the Super Bowl or NFL Playoff games will impact the legacy of various players, or which players/teams/coaches are under the most pressure to perform.[17] Programs like *First*

Take exemplify Wenner's notion that sports media "helped to establish the serial sagas of sporting seasons as a familiar feature of North American popular life," as the show rarely took any days off.[18] In this sense, *First Take* operates in the broader trend of sports media sensationalizing seemingly minor events like offseason transactions and practice reports in order to generate year-round interest in their programs, working to elevate unquantifiable topics such as pressure and historical comparisons into entertaining discussions.

Cultural Context: Hyperpartisan Punditry and Race in the Obama Era

First Take's format shift to a daily, multi-hour debate program centering on Bayless and Smith occurred during a time when political news welcomed a new class of commentators and pundits associated with nascent movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. Political analyst and former *Daily Beast* editor John Avlon labeled this new group of pundits "professional polarizers and…unhinged activists, hard core haters and…paranoid conspiracy theorists," many of whom found increased popularity.[19] These movements spilled over from the political sphere into everyday discourse with extremely opinionated rhetoric. *First Take*'s setup and overall goal hearkens to popular cable news programs built on heated and contentious political debate such as *Crossfire* and *Hannity and Colmes.* However, whereas pundits like Hannity, Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, Chris Matthews, and Keith Olbermann had established careers prior to the rise of the Tea Party on major cable news networks, the 2010s also marked the rise and mainstreaming of explicitly partisan Internet news sources such as *Breitbart, The Blaze,* and *Vox.* This development signaled changes not just in the distribution of media content to a

primarily web-based model, but also toward an increasing demand for explicitly liberal or conservative news content.

In addition to changes of norms in political media, the racial discourse of the 2010s departed sharply from the postracialism and multiculturalism of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Specifically, the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president in American history had varying effects on racial discourse in the United States. Darrel Wanzer-Serrano writes that at the moment of *First Take's* 2012 rebranding, "the significance and relevance of race and racism [were] rejected as antiquated concepts in the post-civil rights era," and, "as a consequence, 'race' [became] so taboo that, through an ironic act of metonymic transfer, use of the term stands in for racism itself."[20] This reinforces elements of postracialism and neoliberalism present in racial discourse discussed in Chapter 2, where racism was popularly believed to be largely overcome and isolated to individual practitioners. However, with the election of Obama, many protests within the larger Tea Party movement were noted for their overt appeals to racism and anxieties about a potential shift of power away from white men in government. Wanzer-Serrano notes that Tea Party rhetoric "seem[s] to oscillate between the overt racism of a bygone era and neoliberal racism-without-race, and, in doing so, they embody a tension between underground diffused racism and overt racism."[21] This oscillation manifested itself in fears about Obama's potentially foreign identity, both in terms of overtly racially-motivated speculation about Obama's birthplace (championed by then-businessman Donald Trump) and in terms of speculation that Obama was a Muslim masquerading as a Christian, representing thinly veiled racism operating through religious-based suspicions.

Central to this twin incarnation of racism in both covert and overt terms in the early 2010s was the rebranding of Fox News from a pro-George W. Bush Administration cheerleader

to a rabid, anti-Obama watchdog on cable television. This was exemplified in the tenor of programs such as Fox News' *Glenn Beck* (2009-2011), whose eponymous host regularly spoke in populist tones to warn viewers about Obama Administration actions and policies, perhaps most infamously espousing his belief that Obama had "a deep seeded hatred for white people."[22] Olivier Jutel argues that pundits like Beck "engaged in seemingly revolutionary exposition in consecrating a populist community across media space, unified by a transgressive dehumanization of its enemy."[23] This dehumanization of oppositional forces occurred in previous decades with the impeachment and targeting of the Clinton administration and opponents of the George W. Bush administration, but was ratcheted up several levels with the election of a Black president. Performances of white male grievances like Beck's switched back and forth between outright racial conspiracies and more subtle ideological claims, such as various conservative pundits linking Obama to the Weather Underground and various Marxist movements. But Tea Party opposition to Obama centered on casting both him and his policies as distinctly "un-American," in addition to being elitist and out of touch with everyday American values and norms. This trend upheld the presumed whiteness and Christianity of the nation as normative and positive American traits.

In fact, the Tea Party movement, which ostensibly championed a rollback of taxes and government regulations in the name of limited government, received extensive (and largely promotional) coverage in its early days from Fox News, especially in comparison to other cable news networks. The pairing of Fox News, a network that infamously trumpeted itself as "Fair and Balanced" in comparison to other networks, and the Tea Party represented a rise of accusations of reverse racism, or white victimization at the expense of post-civil rights minority gains. Kristin Haltinner notes that many Tea Party members deny the ongoing persistence of

racism both within and outside of their ranks, accusing "liberals" of perpetuating racial conflict.[24] This seemingly contradictory attitude of ignoring the existence and effects of racism while also blaming ideological opponents for it fits into several of Bonilla-Silva's elements of "colorblind" racism dominant in the 2000s. But the appearance of viscerally overt racist imagery and speech at Tea Party rallies ruptured this framework in an overt appeal to the regressive, nativist white populism of the early 20th century.

While neither Smith nor Bayless ascribed directly to the Tea Party's tenets, the emergence and enduring popularity of the Tea Party, both legislatively and on cable news networks such as Fox News, created a space for racial tension and racism to be profitable for cable television. In fact, in 2012, the year that *First Take* switched to the daily Bayless/Smith format, the Tea Party was coming off of a 2010 midterm election in which Tea Party Republicans won several seats at local and national levels. 2012 also saw other Tea Party candidates like Texas Senator Ted Cruz find electoral success. Bayless' reputation as an anti-establishment figure and contrarian despite his million-dollar contract with ESPN fit in particularly well to what Khadijan Costley-White terms the Tea Party's paradoxical self-designation as "a populist movement that pitted ordinary people against elites" in the political and media establishment.[25] Like Bayless' self-styled anti-establishment image despite working for a multi-billion dollar sports media entity in ESPN, the Tea Party cast itself as the victim of nefarious forces. These forces ranged from an overreaching federal government to anti-white sentiment to fears of confiscation of arms, all while the movement was financed partly by wealthy donors such as the Koch brothers.[26] These unsubstantiated fears further stoked racialized outrage among constituents in a manner similar to Bayless' diatribes against Black athletes such as LeBron James, Terrell Owens, and Richard Sherman.

"Asinine, Asi-ten, Asi-eleven, Asi-twelve": Dissecting The Formula of *First Take*

On a standard episode of *First Take,* Bayless and Smith sit across a desk from one another, either in person or, if Smith happens to be away from the studio during the NBA season, via a screen positioned where Smith would sit. The moderator (Jay Crawford in early episodes, in later episodes often a female host like Cari Champion) sits between both men, similar to a fight referee in a literal staging of polarization. The moderator introduces a topic, typically involving events in the National Football League (NFL) or National Basketball Association (NBA), two leagues with whom ESPN has significant broadcast rights agreements. Either Bayless or Smith then discuss recent performances by notable teams or athletes. As the first panelist offers up his opinion on the subject, the camera switches from a wide, panning shot showcasing the "debate desk" to a close frame of the first panelist as he begins to lay out his opinion, or "take."

During the delivery of a panelist's take, the camera switches shots to the other panelist or, occasionally, the panelist and the moderator, hoping to capture looks of incredulity or outrage as an interruptive response. While the moderators attempt to prevent interruptions, the camera frequently interrupts by switching back and forth between the panelists, setting up a tense exchange through quick reverse shots on the camera. After approximately two or three minutes, the outrage on the other side of the desk boils over, and the other pundit strikes back, not only assailing the logic behind his counterpart's opinion but also attacking their debate partner on a personal level. Tempers flare up, voices raise in volume and tenor, and the panelist tries to prove that his opinion is smarter and more correct, often at the expense of the other panelist's

apparently inferior opinion. Dramatic pauses and hand gestures are utilized to accentuate the diatribe of the pundit, particularly by Smith, as each word and increasingly outlandish proclamation is allowed to marinate in the fire of the intense stare-down across the desk or the occasional split-screen shot. The camera and framing of the show also elevate each pundit's nonverbal communication of shock, disbelief, anger, skepticism, and anticipation, emphasizing these expressions in an effort to engage multiple senses of *First Take's* viewers.

ESPN utilizes its extensive audiovisual resources to supplement the panelists' opinions with game clips, statistical reports, and brief quotes from Smith or Bayless on the bottom of the screen, with forthcoming debate topics also advertised to retain viewer engagement. This cycle of introducing topics, one man delivering his opinion, and then being violently rebutted by his opponent, is repeated numerous times during the show's multi-hour run time, as guest contributors are occasionally brought in to either challenge or support Bayless and/or Smith. The multi-hour length of the show departs from the crisp, tight, half-hour-long timer-driven pace and styling of *Pardon the Interruption*, mirroring the length of morning or afternoon drive shows on sports talk radio. *First Take's* guest contributors and panelists are mostly fellow sports media members. However, on rare occasion those athletes who have been the subject of invective from Bayless or Smith are brought on to *First Take* to ratchet up the tension and create an increased atmosphere of confrontation, in a manner reminiscent of Jim Rome's charged confrontation with NFL Quarterback Jim Everett decades earlier on ESPN2.

The "take" on any given issue typically runs the gamut of references to prior episodes and opinions they have expressed. The outrage and audaciousness each pundit create with their takes also parallels the rise of Twitter as a primary social media outlet. The takes espoused by these pundits are often peppered with comparisons to various historical athletes thrown in for

good measure in order to sell the event or story as one of significance far beyond its surface level. This style accomplishes several tasks simultaneously. First, it entices casual fans to take at least a passing interest in their conversation. Second, it creates credibility on behalf of the panelists, who project knowledge of the game and, as previously mentioned by cloaking themselves in the history of a particular sport, inflating the importance of a seemingly mundane event. Third, as the claims become more outrageous by either panelist, the reactionary nature of the outrage displayed by the others at the desk is meant to mirror the outrage of viewers, who question the audacity and/or the intelligence of either Bayless or Smith.

In stark contrast to Tony Kornheiser's frequent joking and self-deprecation on *PTI*, Bayless approaches *First Take's* debate desk with the seriousness of a prizefighter, refusing to yield ground to Smith or anyone debating him and rarely, if ever, acknowledging his own missteps. This furthers the divide between *PTI* and *First Take*, as no "Stat Boy" such as Tony Reali dared to correct Smith or Bayless when they invariably misspoke or overstated a point. The stakes of the arguments between Bayless and Smith mirrored the fanaticism of political pundits more than the banter of Kornheiser and Wilbon, with both pundits speaking in grandiose subjectivities that could not be proven or disproven.

Additionally, the prior existing friendship between Kornheiser and Wilbon was replaced with a stark emphasis on all forms of difference between Smith and Bayless, from race to age to geography and even fandom of their respective teams. Here, Bayless's whiteness translated into his sports fandom of teams like the Dallas Cowboys and Oklahoma Sooners, his education at Vanderbilt University, and possessive investment in white players such as Tim Tebow and Jay Cutler. Smith, by contrast, frequently brings up his heritage in Brooklyn, his fandom of the New York Knicks and Pittsburgh Steelers, in addition to his education and brief basketball career at

Winston-Salem State University, a historically Black college. Smith also champions his close connection to several Black NBA players from his days as a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter, ranging from Allen Iverson to Kevin Garnett. This aspect of Smith's *First Take* persona distances him further from Bayless' frequent nostalgia-drenched embracing of older white coaches and athletes while also bolstering Smith's credentials as an ally and advocate for younger Black athletes.

Smith's presence and persona on the show, however, makes *First Take* stand out from its cable news contemporaries and predecessors. As previously mentioned, the figure of the "talking head," either on talk radio or on cable television, was predominantly imagined and embodied as white male, conservative, and middle aged or older. Smith's on-air persona on *First Take* embodies numerous characteristics popularly associated with Black masculinity in a deliberate foil to Bayless' stylings as a print media veteran. Smith's mannerisms, speaking meter, gesturing, and delivery present to viewers an amalgamation of Black masculine styles with influences ranging from stereotypical barbershop talk to what Elijah Anderson terms the "old head" figure of elderly influences in Black communities.[27]

Elements of the verbal styling of Black preachers and well-known figures such as Johnnie Cochran make their appearance in Smith's rants, as his speech patterns and gesturing attempts to draw in Black viewers of numerous age demographics while simultaneously conforming to white expectations of televised Blackness. Todd Boyd claims that performances of Black masculinity such as Smith's are part of a more general cultural climate of excess, arguing that "the more excessive the African American image is, the stronger the likelihood that it will be accepted."[28] Any counterhegemonic potential of Smith's presence in the traditionally white field of televised punditry is capped by dominant white expectations and stereotypes of

Black masculinity. This reality seems to compel Smith to present a persona more acceptable to white audiences due to its exaggerated and caricature-like reliance on traditional Black tropes. Smith's presence departed further from the more buttoned-up journalistic image of *PTI's* Michael Wilbon, as any voice-raising done by Wilbon was done out of exasperation with Kornheiser, and treated as the exception, not the rule of Wilbon's on-camera attitude. Furthermore, Wilbon is generally well liked and respected by both his sports media peers and audiences in part due to his nuanced arguments and genial image, whereas Smith's frequent performances of outrage have earned him the collective ire of both viewers and critics.

Smith's on-air persona has drawn criticism and has been called inauthentic by various media critics such as the *New York Post's* Phil Mushnick, who once asked: "Could it be that Smith's urban street-hip brotha yak—which he seems able to turn on and off with the drop of a Kangol -- is supposed to appeal/pander to young, urban, street-talkin' sports fans?"[29] However, Smith also took several unexpected conservative stances which prevented him from simple classification between hip hop masculinity and respectability politics. One example of this is Smith's frequent exhortation on *First Take* for Black athletes to "stay off the weed," a phrase at odds with many hip-hop songs and a phrase that turned into an Internet meme mocking Smith's disapproval of the drug.[30] Smith also takes superficially conservative stances, such as when he urged Black voters to all vote Republican in one election to avoid what he saw as a problem of Black voters being "…'disenfranchised' because one party knows they've got you under their thumb…The other party knows they'll never get you and nobody comes to address your interest."[31] These nominally conservative stances complicate the dominant reading of Smith as a figure associated by some in the media with Black male hip hop stereotypes.

Several Black sports media members have also critiqued what they saw as the danger of Smith's stereotypical television performances. For example, longtime ESPN and ABC Sports studio host John Saunders argued that "what worked against Stephen A. Smith was that ESPN wanted him to be bombastic and loud," and that Smith's presence on shows like *First Take* "gave them what they wanted, but then they punished him for it" by cancelling his pre-*First Take* television program *Quite Frankly with Stephen A. Smith.*[32] Saunders contends that Smith was simultaneously rewarded by ESPN and punished by its fans for appealing to a caritaturish image of Black masculinity. Jason Whitlock also lamented that ESPN wanted to promote a certain "rapperish" persona for Black men as on-air talents, stating his opinion that ESPN "wanted everybody to be more like Stuart Scott and Stephen A. Smith."[33] So while Smith garnered more and more airtime and appeared on multiple programs, nominally increasing the amount of on-air diversity, the accompanying backlash and the replication of popular stereotypes of Blackness reiterated ESPN's limitation in diversifying representations of Black masculinity.

Smith explained *First Take's* appeal in a 2018 *New Yorker* profile, noting that "'Back in the day, you watched [television to] learn the news…now you can get the news in five minutes…between your smartphones and everything else.'"[34] Smith says that *First Take* stands out because current viewers are "interested in watching different perspectives, hearing what people have to say, what their opinions are, and why…and sort of gauging whether or not they're right or wrong."[35] Smith's commentary connects *First Take* to several different cultural and industrial currents of the 2010s. The programming strategy of *First Take* clearly builds upon *Pardon the Interruption*, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, supplements news programs with commentary while deliberately acknowledging the frivolity of sports news compared to political news. Smith also cites the fact that smartphones, increased internet access, and social media

delivered headlines, scores, and statistics to viewers instantaneously in ways not possible in the early 2000s at the launch of *PTI*.[36] Smith argues that this wide availability of information then feeds demand for commentary on these events and games, an area in which he and Bayless excelled. *The New Yorker* contends that *First Take* "subtly situates sports debate as a Black-American cultural form: rappers are among the most frequent guests, and an original track by Wale has been its theme song since shortly after Smith became one of its stars."[37] Much like *PTI*, *First Take* aired adjacent to *SportsCenter*, immediately following the morning *SportsCenter*, building on many of the athletes, teams, and stories that were just discussed on *SportsCenter*.

First Take's reliance on incendiary rhetoric, while not as widely criticized as political talk radio shows such as *The Sean Hannity Show*, *The Alex Jones Show*, Michael Savage's *The Savage Nation* or radio shows such as those of Howard Stern or Don Imus, positions the program as a sporting successor to this climate of increasingly shocking rhetoric. Former *Sports Illustrated* writer Richard Dietsch summarized negative opinion toward Smith and Bayless, glossing *First Take's* star pundits as "carnival barkers."[38] In response to claims of staged anger and outrage, Both Bayless and producer Charlie Dixon denied such charges. Bayless swore that he had "never, ever, as God as my witness, contrived a single debate in a single show," and Dixon reiterated this stance, claiming: "there was never once…on ESPN…a time when we said, 'You know what would be great: if you could do the other side of this argument.'"[39] These statements from ESPN encourage what Hall terms a dominant, or preferred, reading of *First Take*, implying that producers pick popular topics on which both panelists genuinely disagree.[40] This emphasis on the authenticity of pundits' convictions fits into the industrial emphasis on reality television present on both network and cable television in the 2000s and 2010s.

During an appearance as a guest of the program, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban voiced public criticism of the rhetorical tactics of the show, arguing that Smith and Bayless speak in "complete generalities so no one can question you…you don't ever use facts, you don't ever use substance."[41] To elaborate on this point, Cuban took umbrage with Bayless' assertion that Lebron James had "the biggest collapse of a superstar that we've ever witnessed on a Finals or championship stage," and that in the subsequent finals in 2012, James "played harder than Kevin Durant did four straight games."[42] Cuban's critique of *First Take* echoed critiques of the harshening of political discourse on cable television punditry. On *First Take* Bayless and Smith's shouting about intangible and unquantifiable characteristics like "heart," "desire," "choking," and "clutch," mirrored political pundits' frequent invocation of similarly unquantifiable characteristics like "patriotism," "electability," "personal responsibility," and "American values." In obscuring direct terminology for racial disparities, political and sports media practiced a form of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms "cultural racism," using coded language to deny ongoing systemic barriers to racial equity.[43] Adopting this formula of debating generalities and opinion rather than analytics, *First Take* became a significant ratings success in the months following this switch in 2012. By October of 2012, ratings among all viewers had risen by 33%, and the ratings for male viewers ages 18-34 had gone up by 54%[44].

The setup, format, and makeup of *First Take* position Bayless and Smith as caricatures of white and Black masculinity, carrying over these strategies from sports talk radio, a predominantly white and male medium. In contrast to the typical angry white maleness of talk radio hosts, Matthew Henry notes that standards of Black masculinity in the cultural mainstream often include "an urban aesthetic, a nihilistic attitude, and an aggressive posturing," as well as a "commodification of hip-hop culture."[45] Smith's persona on *First Take* invokes certain elements

of this stereotyped Black masculinity, as seen in Smith's frequent wearing of a suit and tie in comparison to Bayless' decidedly less formal choice of a shirt and jacket. Unlike the friendly banter between Kornheiser and Wilbon on *PTI,* Bayless and Smith's debates and confrontations on *First Take* are presented as personal, advancing the presumption is that both men will talk about these issues until they can no longer breathe.

While positioned in a somewhat adversarial context, the bond between Smith and Bayless is ultimately encouraged by the recurring format of the show and occasional handshakes and embraces at the end of the program which hint at the exaggerated nature of their conflicts. Furthermore, Smith has spoken fondly of Bayless on numerous occasions, calling Bayless his "brother," and describing their relationship as "tight in a very different and unorthodox way."[46] This admission of an external friendship outside of the program further hints at the performative elements of *First Take's* trumped up interracial conflict, bringing the program back to the epigraphic comparison with professional wrestling, whose reliance on stage personas and hypermasculine projections mark the presentation of its stars. Whereas *PTI* branded itself as a genuine and unscripted exchange of two older newspaper veterans and friends, the switching back and forth of Bayless and Smith between friends outside the studio and adversaries within the studio highlights *First Take's* reliance on staged racial tension.

First Take's courting of racial tension echoes a trend in race and news media that Douglas Kellner argues began in the mid 1990s with the OJ Simpson trial. Specifically, Kellner notes that various aspects of the trial and accompanying media coverage "provided an explosive race spectacle in which the wide chasm between the races in the United States – especially Blacks and whites – became all too visible."[47] This formula of bringing in more Black voices on TV news as pundits—but then positioning them against white counterparts on issues of racial

conflict such as the Simpson case—is echoed through *First Take's* debates. In addition to Bayless' aforementioned run-ins with athletes and coaches as a print columnist, *First Take* producer Jamie Horowitz described Bayless as someone who "has a unique ability to at once inspire and infuriate, all the while attracting viewers."[48] The ability to spark conversation, whether positive or negative toward the host, was a prerequisite to punditry, and the same elements were true of Bayless and Smith as the centerpieces of *First Take.*

Concerning gender, *First Take's* featuring of predominantly male panelists while occasionally allowing female moderators or contributors reinforced dominant cultural expectations of sport as a male social space and fortifies the concept of male fandom and interest in sport as a social norm. Female journalists such as Dana Jacobson, Cari Champion, and Molly Qerim appeared only as moderators of the debate, often interjecting with pleas for rationality and restraint or returns to the topic from Smith and Bayless. This gendered assignment of roles, with only a few exceptions like Jemele Hill being allowed to serve as debaters, positioned the female presence on the show in a nurturing and peacekeeping role, leaving debates and, by proxy, sports knowledge, to the male panelists. David Nylund observes that male-centric sports talk programs such as the *Jim Rome Show* are often marked by "aggressive, masculinist" speech that encourages "male listeners to identify with the features of traditional masculinity."[49]

Associating sports knowledge with masculinity extends to fantasy sports on the Internet, where Nickolas W. Davis and Margaret Carlisle Duncan observe, "male sports fans can join chat rooms with individuals who share their desire to gain and exchange knowledge of several hypermasculine contact sports, thus reinforcing hegemonic masculinity."[50] Even as women's sports secured broadcast rights on major networks like ESPN during the 2000s and 2010s, media studies scholars note that the 2010s marked a "deepening quantitative dearth of coverage of

women's sports" in comparison to major men's sports, as women's sports garnered only 3.2% of sports news coverage from selected local news outlets.[51] By regulating women to secondary and supporting roles in its debate structure, *First Take* continued *PTI's* (as well as ESPN's) tacit endorsement of male privilege in sports media, and sport television in particular.

LeBron James, Tim Tebow, and Expressing Racial Tension in Black and White

The pairing of Smith and Bayless demonstrates ESPN's desire to nominally represent both Black and white opinions when debating issues. The confrontational format featuring Smith and Bayless had been attempted previously by ESPN in a series of segments titled "Old School vs. Nu Skool."[52] By staging a white man and a Black man engaging in contentious arguments, the program capitalized on internal and external sources of racial tension, even if the subject matter was ostensibly strictly related to sports. Though racial issues are not typically discussed on the show, the style, rhetoric, and presentation of each debater represented stereotypes about white and Black masculinity. With this strategy, ESPN hoped to engage with both white male and Black male audience groups, whether they were watching to agree with their purported racial representative or to disagree with what one or both panelists would say about their favorite teams or players. These debates also represent what David J. Leonard defines as a disingenuous adaptation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s rhetoric, in which white sports fans presumably "do not judge the players or their team by the color of their skin but by their performance on the field."[53]

The use of LeBron James as a frequent topic of debate not only capitalized on James' enduring popularity, but also presented an opportunity for a Black/white binary of opinion on James' abilities and greatness. Richard Mocarski and Andrew C. Billings write that, from an

early age, James teamed up with Nike to project an image of power and control, presenting himself as "powerful and a master of his body, befitting Black masculinity, but also White masculinity."[54] After being praised early in his career and compared favorably to Michael Jordan, James had been condemned by numerous sports media figures for his "Decision" special in 2010, in which he announced on ESPN that he would be leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers to join the Miami Heat as a free agent. James was accused by media and fans of needless self-aggrandizement in televising *The Decision*, with the backlash lasting for significantly longer than both James and ESPN anticipated.[55] This represents what Sean Fourney and Timothy Brown term as "a unique space" occupied by Black athletes like James, "in that there exist[s] expressive restrictions for them despite great adulation for their physical feats."[56] Rhetorically, then, James attempts to defy negative stereotypes of Black male masculinity to secure endorsements and support from white fans and businesses while also maintaining a sense of authenticity with Black fans and supporters. Indeed, Danielle Sarver Coombs and David Cassilo argue that since James "began speaking publicly and presenting symbolic images as evidence of support for causes related to social and racial justice, he has been framed as an athlete-activist in the tradition of such all-time greats as Ali, Russell, and Brown."[57]

Even as Bayless does not typically criticize James' philanthropic efforts, his frequent diminishing of his on-court greatness serves as an attempt to marginalize James in comparison to more "postracial" and apolitical stars such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. Bayless' criticism of Black athletes such as James fits into what Kyle W. Kusz describes as a pattern of "vitriolic comments regularly expressed in sports television and especially on sports talk radio against African American male athletes (which usually do not mention race) as comments that are implicitly about race and maintaining white normativity and white supremacy."[58] On *First*

Take, criticisms from white television pundits like Bayless, even those that center on supposedly race neutral terms such as "work ethic" and "team-first leadership," as seen in Bayless' obsession with Tebow, entrench whiteness as the normal and desired American experience.

Bayless frequently criticized Lebron James' perceived inability to perform in clutch situations. For instance, after a 2011 NBA Finals loss, Bayless assigned "99%" of the blame for the team's loss to James, claiming it was "the all-time pathetic performance" in NBA Finals history.[59] After James' won his first NBA Finals in 2012, Bayless defended his previous invective toward James, arguing that he has "only consistently spoken the valid truth about LeBron, who did declare himself basically the next Michael Jordan." Furthermore, he still denied that James had the "clutch gene," despite the fact that James earned the 2012 NBA Finals Most Valuable Player award.[60] Later, during a 2014 NBA Finals game, in which James was temporarily unable to play due to heat-related cramps in San Antonio, Bayless criticized what he saw as "a classic lack of intangibles on Lebron James' part," adding that "he wasn't there when his team needed him most."[61]

The invocation of a "clutch gene" nominally hearkened back to the overtly biological racism of decades past, even though Bayless argued that other Black athletes had this gene. Importantly, this more coded racial style avoided the overt racism of Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder or Al Campannis in the 1980s, but still was used disproportionately to describe Black athletes. Opposing Bayless in the same segment, Smith not only noted Bayless' arrogance and refusal to acknowledge his past mistakes concerning James, but also praised James for hiring Black agents and business partners, claiming his pride "as a Black man… of the fact that he lifted his boys up…brought them along with him, have them controlling his brand" and "building his brand."[62] Smith's deployment of collective racial uplift rhetoric authenticates his Blackness to viewers, as

he aligns himself with James' business and professional associates on the basis of their common racial background.

On many occasions, Bayless compared James unfavorably to Michael Jordan, an athlete who, as chronicled by David Andrews, Mary G. McDonald, and others, is a marker of postracialism and marketable Blackness.[63] In critiquing young Black players like James while elevating supposedly postracial stars like Jordan, Bayless exemplified colorblind racist rhetoric through his assignment of these same untraceable and unquantifiable characteristic to white stars like Tim Tebow. On *First Take*, whiteness is recast by Bayless as "determination" and "work ethic," the same characteristics he regularly accuses James of lacking. To Bayless, Tebow's whiteness operates as an invisible trait that James can never attain. These tropes were often applied to popular stereotypes of Black male laziness in a manner similar to Bonilla-Silva's frame of cultural racism, blaming what whites see as cultural failings on the part of the Black community in not pursuing success in the same manner as white Americans.[64]

Bayless' coded ranting against young Black men is similar to white conservative pundits such as Bill O'Reilly, who assail various aspects of contemporary Black masculinity such as hip-hop culture while linking young Black masculinity to criminality and other negative stereotypes. However, Bayless enacts conservatism like Fox News pundits through the values he heralds in his preferred athletes, such as unselfishness, intelligence, teamwork, and individual determination, attributes that Leonard and others note are frequently ascribed to white athletes and found lacking in Black athletes.[65] Bayless also connects to 2010s development in political punditry by recasting himself as an anti "Political Correctness" (PC) force. The emerging post-Obama racial environment that *First Take* both exploited and helped bring into definition required a new kind of media figure - the white man who speaks against the ostensible grain of

social decorum, and who can be positioned as courageous for doing so - the passionate, full throated advocate for whiteness who will stake (and even seek) out polarizing positions. By doing so, figures like Bayless can expect to be criticized, but he can also count on public support. Even as Bayless is widely derided, he is also praised by some for his fortitude.[66]

When Bayless left *First Take* and signed with Fox Sports in 2016, Jamie Horowitz, who orchestrated the move, called Bayless "equal parts fearless and relentless," with a "rebellious spirit." Horowitz even dubbed Bayless "one of the most incisive opinionists in all of media."[67] Shortly after leaving ESPN, Bayless described his new show, *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* as an opportunity to "go up against the juggernaut that is *First Take*…if you understand me, you know that I live for challenges."[68] Bayless, one of the most highly paid, well-known commentators in sports media, deploys a variety of what Michael Serazio describes as "anti-establishment discourse," which "appropriates an outsider image on behalf of insiders" and turns it toward the world of sport media.[69] It further positions Bayless as a sort of populist hero standing up for the everyday fan, a strategy similar to the Tea Party's concurrent self-branding as "a movement of 'the people'…from America's heartland, a nostalgic link to a farming and rural history, and puritan roots."[70]

Bayless's effacement of power has racial dimensions and implications as well. In one curious outburst on his new program, he argued that "I am not, and never have been, a member of the 'White Establishment.' The 'White Establishment' never liked me. I don't fit. I'm a communist, man. I'm going to break the rules."[71] While Bayless has never demonstrated any communist (or any leftist) thought in columns or on the air, Bayless's comparison of himself to dangerous outsider ideology allows him claim a position of aggrieved dispossession, even while ostensibly blaming and deriding a "culture of grievance" for his plight. In Bayless' curious

formulation, the "white establishment" is aligned against the interests of whites, which he steadfastly defends against the supposedly dissembling forces of "political correctness."[72] "I say what I say because I believe it from the bottom of my soul and I can back it up," he told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2016.[73] According to his preferred mode of self-presentation, Bayless can claim the status of one who bravely speaks truth to power, while subtly revising what constitutes power in the first place. This type of self-presentation is common among public defenders of white racial interests, from Bill O'Reilly to Milo Yiannoppoulos to Donald Trump, who like Bayless, defiantly proclaim their willingness to offend as a moral virtue and as a declaration of manly strength.[74] It is, as Serazio notes, an act of cooptation, "a way of channeling revolutionary undercurrents— many derived from economic dissatisfaction—into safer ideological and political harbors."[75]

Smith's positioning within these debates serves as an attempt by ESPN to represent Blackness, and Smith is often turned against Bayless on issues debating the merits of certain white athletes. For example, NFL Quarterback Tim Tebow was a frequent topic of conversation on *First Take* for years, with Bayless offering effusive praise to the former Heisman Trophy winner. Concerning Tebow, Bayless described him in mainly qualitative terms, calling him a "force of nature," gushing that Tebow undergoes "a shocking transformation" at the end of games. He also argued that Tebow "inspires the whole football team" and, in a nod to Tebow's outspoken Christian faith, questioned if teammates thought Tebow was "divinely inspired."[76] Bayless was challenged on this point directly by Black NFL Hall of Fame Wide Receiver Cris Carter, paired on the same side of the desk as Smith, who said that Tebow's ability to inspire teammates was unquantifiable and that his competitiveness wasn't demonstrably greater than that of any other NFL player. Bayless responded explosively, telling Carter "You're wrong on

that… You're dead wrong on that!" When Carter countered that Bayless was unqualified to judge the competitiveness of players since he never played in the NFL, Bayless retorted "I don't care, I know what I'm talking about," following it by questioning Carter's own leadership and ability to inspire teammates during his NFL career.[77]

This focus on intangibles and "the will to win," often juxtaposed with frequent coverage of Tebow's evangelical protestant faith and status as a college superstar at Florida reinforces notions of hegemonic white masculinity. Bayless was criticized by sports media watchdogs *Deadspin* for becoming "the chief exponent of the kind of priestly mystification and intellectual dishonesty that would eventually go by the name Tebowmania." *Deadspin* also noted that in one week in late May 2012—during the NFL Offseason—Tebow's name came up over 80 times during *First Take's* debates.[78] Smith, in these instances, often presents himself as the voice of reason to Bayless' obsession with Tebow, bringing in statistics to support his claims about Tebow's suspect abilities as a passer and noting the fortunate circumstances which allowed Tebow to succeed. Smith's tempering counteracts Bayless' racially coded comments about Tebow's intangibles and will to win games and inspire teammates.[79]

The racial coding also extended to Tebow's faith, as Tebow stands in through Bayless and others' glowing oratories as an exemplar of the Protestant Work Ethic, a religious detailing often left absent when Bayless discusses Black Christian athletes.[80] Leonard writes that "In a society purportedly without a moral fabric, especially on America's sporting fields, Tebow was seen to bring a level of stability to his team," and that Tebow "was seen to be the perfect leader, because he brought discipline, morality, and an ethos that turned his (Black) teammates into more productive ballers and citizens."[81] Bayless' diatribes concerning Tebow connect him not only to the traditional protestant work ethic, but also to rhetoric closely associated with elements

of the contemporary conservative movement, emphasizing hard work/individual uplift, traditional moral values, and an outward embracing of Protestant principles. At the time of Tebow's ascendancy to relevance in the NFL, the Tea Party movement gained traction in part by emphasizing a return to what they claimed were the Judeo-Christian roots of American society, and while Bayless has never pledged loyalty to the Tea Party, his adoption of this rhetoric for televised sports debate reveals its prevalence across American discourse in the early 2010s.

The extolling of Tebow's supposed moral superiority and virtuousness falls in line with what Leonard terms a "recipe for leadership" typically ascribed to white athletes, a recipe which centers on "unselfishness, determination, scrappiness, intelligence, and a desire to win."[82] Matthew Hawzen and Joshua Newman note that sports media racially codified Tebow as "a spiritually endowed athlete rather than a 'natural', or racially endowed one…" and as someone who was "spiritually endowed with *it* and who worked hard at this gift from God, thus, meritocratically speaking, he deserved i*t."*[83] Michael Butterworth argues that "sports media commonly default[s] to racial norms when constructing mythical heroes…" and that "these norms tend to reinforce 'white' ideals rooted in masculine character and leadership."[84] Dan Grano adds to this by claiming that white quarterbacks such as Tebow are constructed as the "archetypical figures of white athletic character fantasies" by white fans and sport media members.[85] Here, a focus on ostensibly race-neutral cultural ideals which supposedly make Tebow a star to pundits like Bayless worked to racially ascribe these positive characteristics to white athletes and often deny them from Black athletes like LeBron James or Terrell Owens.

Even as Bayless launched support behind a widely popular figure in Tebow, the degree to which he supports Tebow positions Bayless as an iconoclast taking on an entrenched establishment in the sport media industry. Bayless' flouting of conventional wisdom and logic in

his borderline-reckless support of Tebow mirrors Tea Party distrust of "establishment" messaging concerning intellectualism, policies, and the Obama administration. Furthermore, ascribing these aforementioned intangible and subjective virtues onto Tebow and, therefore, whiteness, exemplifies what George Lipsitz terms whiteness' status as "the unmarked category against which difference is constructed."[86] Aligning Tebow with these "traditional" values praised by sports media also connects this discourse to conventions of hegemonic white masculinity, as Tebow's famous background as the child of Christian missionaries in the Philippines echoes Theodore Roosevelt's popularizing of sports as a developer of (white) Christian and American virtues.[87] Lauding an openly Evangelical star athlete like Tebow in racially neutral terms also paralleled an ongoing Tea Party yearning for a return to what they saw as the significance of Christianity to America's founding fathers, a practice Jill Lepore terms "historical fundamentalism".[88]

On *First Take*, Smith acts as an effective foil to Bayless' worship of Tebow. For example, when Bayless suggested that Tebow was a better late-game quarterback than seven-time Super Bowl champion Tom Brady, Smith questioned Bayless violently, calling Bayless' opinion "blasphemous… it ain't unconstitutional, it's not egregious, it's not derogatory…it's BLASPHEMOUS," also slamming what he saw as Bayless' "unmitigated gall" and "audacity to even bring Tim Tebow in the same sentence as Tom Brady."[89] Rather than simply explaining Tebow's poor play with numbers or statistics, Smith answers Bayless' hyperbole with his own brand of hyperbole, humorously glossing Bayless as "Skip Baseless" for his seemingly undying Tebow support in the face of contrary statistical evidence.[90]

While Smith is occasionally positioned on *First Take* as the voice of reason in response to the trolling and dogmatic persona of Bayless, he is also presented as too impassioned for his

own good. This is perhaps best evidenced by the frequent discussions of white NFL Quarterback Jay Cutler. Any mention of Cutler frequently sends Smith into histrionics. On numerous occasions, Smith has questioned the toughness, heart, and football competency of Cutler, at one point dubbing him "the epitome of white privilege" in a 2017 episode of the program.[91] Smith also referred to Cutler as a "disease," horrible," and as a player who "can't galvanize anybody."[92]

This negative framing of Smith also occurs when Tebow is brought up, often by Bayless. During one of the many debates about Tebow's ability, Bayless argued that Tebow had been discriminated against and stereotyped by NFL coaches and executives in a manner similar to many Black quarterbacks due to his running ability. This prompted Smith to quickly interrupt, incredulously asking Bayless if "you used the word 'Discrimination' because of that?" to which a defiant Bayless replied "YES I DID…And I'm gonna use it again! DIS-CRIM-I-NA-TION!"[93] This prompted Smith to scream at the audacity for Bayless to appropriate a term used against many talented Black quarterbacks by NFL executives and scouts, including the show's guest panelist Kordell Stewart. Smith also noted that Tebow, unlike many Black quarterbacks with superior skill sets coming out of college, was drafted in the first round of the NFL draft. Smith concluded by noting that the only reason why he wasn't ranting longer and louder was due to a lack of time and an upcoming commercial break. In this context, Smith is positioned similarly to Black pundits on political television who are accused by conservative white pundits of exaggerating the effects of contemporary racism or, in the case of Black activists such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, "vilified" for mentioning anti-Black racism and discrimination.[94]

Statements such as these position Smith as a counterforce to dominant white athletes while also stoking imagined white outrage from Bayless. This element of Smith's persona positions him as what Aida Harvey Wingfield, in a critical study of discrimination in the

workplace, terms the stereotypical "angry Black man" who is "middle-class" and "educated," but "perceives racial discrimination everywhere and is always enraged."[95] Smith's rage at Cutler and occasionally at Tebow stands in as a metric of hypermasculinity in lieu of physical confrontation. Smith's outrage toward his white co-hosts and occasionally toward white athletes and coaches reinforces this popularly constructed stereotype of Black male rage, which works to discredit critiques Smith may make about systemic racial inequality in sports or society.

The racial tension present on *First Take* rarely ventures outside the world of on-field debate, as Smith and Bayless, however angry they may become, always appear side by side the next day. The message ESPN is projecting implies sports are a space where despite external racial tensions, Black and white individuals can come together on common ground. In its attempts to attract Black viewers to a genre traditionally cast as a white space, Smith's presence both offers possibilities of resistance while also relying on stereotypical framings and depictions of Black masculinity in pursuit of commercial success. This also reinforces what Serazio identifies as the limits of anti-establishment discourse, which "uses the language of hip rebellion to distract from the realities and policies that exacerbate inequality and immobility."[96]

Controversies and Fallouts

A December 2012 episode highlighted the more controversial elements of *First Take's* reliance on racial tension. The show's panel that day included Smith, Rob Parker, and host/moderator Cari Champion, all of whom identified as Black, and Bayless and Christian Fauria, a former NFL player, both of whom identified as white. Champion introduced the topic of Black NFL Quarterback Robert Griffin III's refusal to want to be solely known as the NFL's

best Black quarterback to the panel. Griffin followed up that wanted to be the best quarterback regardless of racial identity. Parker spoke first, initially describing Griffin's comments as a "red flag," while also mentioning that he'd heard "a couple of times now…of a Black guy distancing himself from Black people."[97] Parker then went on to explain that he'd heard this distancing associated with Griffin in particular several times and then went on to state that after numerous conversations with his own friends in Washington D.C., he felt compelled to ask a "straight, honest question: is he [Griffin] a brother, or is he a 'cornball' brother," stating that Griffin wasn't "really down with the cause. He's not one of us. He's kind of Black but he's not really, like, the guy you want to hang out with because he's off to something else."[98] Champion further interrogated Parker for the meaning behind his comments, and Parker admitted that he really had "no information at all" to support his claims, but mentioned that Griffin had "a white fiancée," and had heard talk that "he [Griffin] was a Republican." Ultimately, Parker rationalized his question by clarifying that he was "just trying to dig deeper into why he [Griffin] has an issue."[99]

The rest of the panel then proceeded in a few different directions. Bayless proceeded to ask Parker what Griffin's braided hairstyle meant to him, to which Parker responded: "wearing braids is…you're a brother." Smith, on the other hand, seemed to take a much more serious approach to the subject. When given permission to speak, Smith stated that he was "uncomfortable with where we [*First Take*] just went," and further opined that "the color of his [Griffin's] fiancée" is irrelevant and that "the braids that he has in his hair are his business."[100] Smith went on to interpret Griffin's comments as an attempt to "appease the masses," which he personally found "irritating." Smith's comments on the situation highlight the often difficult and inconsistent standards of media coverage that Black athletes face disproportionately, as Black athletes and media members are often assumed to speak on behalf of the entire Black population.

Smith also pushed back against Parker's stereotyping of Black identity, ironically while he himself enacted many of these same stereotypes on *First Take* on a daily basis.

Condemnation toward Parker and *First Take* emerged on a variety of media sources. Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates weighed in on the incident while writing for *The Atlantic.* Coates focused on the difficult position that Griffin found himself in, writing that "if [Griffin] declines to talk about race than [sic] that is evidence of 'distancing.' If he talks about it, he will eventually say something that will leave him subject to the rantings of someone like Parker."[101] Coates' statement underscores the difficulty of discussing race and sports in the "postracial" climate of the Twenty-first Century, highlighting the tenuous position of players like Griffin, who are doubly judged not just as NFL players, but also as Black athletes. Coates' ideas echo those of Ben Carrington, who argues that "only rarely has the Black athlete spoken, or been allowed to speak…[they are] normally spoken for."[102] Other sports media outlets took this opportunity to criticize both Parker and *First Take*. The next day, Yahoo! Sports' described *First Take* as "the kind of dreck that makes the worst political commentary programs look like great television."[103] The author of the piece, Doug Farrar, stated: "we tend to expect preposterous stuff from this show -- after all, that's what that show does…but what Rob Parker said went far beyond the parameters of "opinion" and veered quickly into something that should have ESPN seriously considering whether they want Parker representing even their worst traffic jam of a media product."[104] While the article is by no means the sole indicator of public opinion, the presence of such an inflammatory piece from a large news outlet like Yahoo Sports that was so derisive and critical about a competitor's program represented a significant sample of public and media opinions surrounding *First Take,* Parker, and Bayless.

Parker was initially suspended for thirty days by ESPN. An executive for the company described Parker's comments, as well as the subsequent backlash, as errors "in both judgment and communication," while also reiterating that "we [ESPN] will continue to discuss important issues on 'First Take,' including race."[105] ESPN defended the program's role, stating that "Debate is an integral part of sports and we will continue to engage in it on 'First Take,'" concluding that "…we believe what we have learned here and the steps we have taken will help us do all that better."[106] In distancing itself from the negative publicity which accompanied Parker's comments while still reaffirming its commitment to the format, ESPN positioned Parker as an individual outlier rather than as a clear product of the outrage discourse and reckless hyperpartisan rhetoric encouraged through programs like *First Take*. Parker's contract with ESPN was ultimately not renewed. The network bypassed an opportunity for a more complex critique of *First Take's* format and its history of encouraging outlandish and outrageous statements from its co-hosts.

The show's controversy also extended to guests, frequently Black athletes or musicians, whom Bayless had criticized heavily on previous episodes of the show. Bayless' penchant for provocative rancor and trolling was called out by then-Seattle Seahawks Cornerback Richard Sherman on a March 7, 2013 episode of the program. Beginning on a confrontational note through a satellite link-up, Sherman highlighted his professional and academic accomplishments, including graduating from Stanford, with boasting that, by contrast, Bayless had "never accomplished anything." Sherman's opening salvo culminated with an infamous declaration that "in my [Sherman's] 24 years of life, I'm better at life than you."[107] This heated exchange between Bayless and Sherman attempted to reinforce the stereotype of Sherman as an "angry Black man." Bayless contributed to this framing by cutting off Sherman as he attempted to

describe his numerous community service projects, instead redirecting the conversation to Sherman's penchant for "trash talking." Sherman countered by reiterating his commitments to excellence both on the field and through service projects, adding that Bayless "always want[s] to bring the negative side, because that's who you are…You speak negatively about everybody, including LeBron, including Kobe, including everybody…because you don't have anything positive to say about anybody." Sherman then claimed that he was "intelligent enough and capable enough to understand that you are [an] ignorant, pompous egotistical cretin," promising to crush Bayless "on here in front of everybody, because I'm tired of hearing about it."[108]

The exchange between Bayless and Sherman was roundly derided by both external and internal voices in sport media. Perhaps most notably, fellow ESPN employee Bill Simmons, founder of sport and culture site *Grantland*, tweeted that he "thought it was awful and embarrassing to everyone involved, and that "Nobody won. Everyone lost. Including ESPN."[109] Even the NFL, a business partner of ESPN, allowed a writer on NFL.com to submit a column with the headline "Richard Sherman buries Skip Bayless on ESPN," signifying the prevalence of anti-Bayless sentiment across sports media.[110] While acknowledging that Sherman relied on a great number of personal attacks, *Deadspin* nevertheless praised Sherman for "Crap[ping] all over" Bayless on the segment, while christening Bayless as a "resident ESPN troll."[111] Bayless himself referred to the incident years later as a time when he felt unsupported by ESPN, even fearing that *First Take* would be cancelled over backlash to the exchange with Sherman.[112] Through exchanges like these, Bayless cultivates the image of a modern day Howard Cosell, challenging athletes and engaging in verbal sparring, but does so in a much more overtly antagonistic manner and, subsequently, garners little of the praise Cosell received from athletes, fans, and media members.

While elements of racial tension occupied a prominent place on *First Take*, underlying gender tensions rarely surfaced, as both the programs punditry and its subjects of debate reflected the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in American professional sports. However, in 2014, a significant incident on *First Take* occurred during a debate segment following NFL running back Ray Rice's short 2-game suspension for assaulting his then-fiancé in 2014. While attempting to debate with Bayless about the appropriateness of the suspension, Smith insinuated that women should not do anything to "provoke wrong actions" from attackers.[113] After immediate outcry and a televised apology in which he described his comments as "the most egregious error of [his] career," Smith was suspended for one week from both *First Take* and his ESPN radio show.[114] ESPN did not produce an official statement on the suspension. However, an internal memo sent to ESPN employees revealed that then-president John Skipper "engaged in a thoughtful discussion about appropriate next steps…" with "…a diverse group of women and men in our company," adding that Smith's statements "did not reflect our company's view or values."[115] This memo came after *SportsNation* host Michelle Beadle, in a move similar to Simmons, attacked Smith and *First Take* on Twitter, taking issue with Smith's insinuations that women could provoke their own beatings.[116]

The pattern of ESPN responding to *First Take* controversy after other employees publicly critiqued the program or its hosts demonstrates a power struggle to control the message between executives and employees of the network. It also shows the growing and unwieldy power of social media, as these attacks were delivered not on ESPN-controlled programs, but on independent Twitter feeds, putting the network in a difficult position to mediate backlash between its employees. ESPN's handling of this incident suggests that the network addresses issues of gender only when they become problematic or potentially brand-damaging. The fact

that Smith was welcomed back after his offensive statement while Parker was not brought back also implies that ESPN was less comfortable engaging with racial controversy on *First Take* than gendered controversy.

The reasoning behind these suspensions suggests the existence of a metaphorical line of sorts that cannot be crossed by the program's panelists. The formatting and tenor of the program, built around expressions of outrage as forms of racialized hypermasculinity, is certainly culpable for creating an atmosphere in which comments such as these lie just at the edge of the show's discourse. While ESPN reacted swiftly to control the public relations damage from Smith's comments, the underlying structure and format producing these discussions remained unchanged, and *First Take's* privileging of masculinity and racial tension to gain viewers was indirectly endorsed by the network.

Conclusions

John Fiske writes that televised news programs "often include radical voices," but qualifies that these voices "will be controlled doses whose extent and positioning…will be chosen by the agents of the dominant ideology."[117] *First Take,* through its recurring format, frequent comparison of present athletes to past greats such as Michael Jordan, and its retention of provocative panelists, focuses racialized outrage in the sports world to the parameters of debate on the program. This extends ESPN further into the genre of confrontational debate as a form of entertainment that began with *PTI,* while ESPN still offers programs such as *SportsCenter* and *Outside the Lines* as more legitimate and serious forms of journalism and opinion to retain its place as an authoritative voice in sports news. Focusing *First Take's* outrage on trivial issues or

giving surface level treatment to social issues in the world of sports evades meaningful critiques of dominant ideological frames, while simultaneously using the program to normalize ESPN's other programming and personalities.

Through a more explicit showcasing of racial tensions on its programs and an increased reliance on outrage discourse, *First Take* represents a clear shift in racial and gender discourses associated with the late 2000s and early 2010s. Compared to the postracial multiculturalism reflected by *PTI, First Take* instead mirrors the rising racial tensions of the Obama Era and the Tea Party's white backlash in the early 2010s. Bayless eventually left *First Take* in 2016 to jump to Fox Sports 1 (FS1), starting a similar program called *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed.* ESPN retained *First Take's* formula of interracial male debate by keeping Smith and replacing Bayless with a white counterpart in Max Kellerman and, occasionally, Will Cain. Cain's presence links *First Take* more directly to conservative political punditry, as he had worked for Glenn Beck's conservative news outlet *The Blaze* prior to his employment with ESPN.[118] Cain's replacement of Bayless, then, demonstrates ESPN's continual willingness to voice white grievance politics, even more directly than Bayless' style in years prior. *First Take* also presents Kellerman as a token white liberal while still representing what is supposed to be a white perspective.

Smith also bridged this divide between political and sports media by appearing on CNN and other political channels to discuss moments of intersection between sports and politics. His appearances on the network range from expanding upon his comments urging Black people to vote Republican to more explicit sports content such as discussing Colin Kaepernick's apparent failure to vote in the 2016 election or analyzing Roger Goodell's future with the NFL following the Ray Rice scandal. Smith was ultimately rewarded with a ubiquitous presence across ESPN

and a seven-figure contract, placing him among the highest-salaried personalities in sports media while solidifying his image as an authoritative Black male voice in sports punditry.[119]

The dissertation now follows Skip Bayless and *First Take* producer Jamie Horowitz to rival network FS1, a division of NewsCorp. I will chart the influence of *First Take* on FS1's plethora of pundit programming following the success of *First Take.* This movement began with Bayless's new show *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* and continues to the central focus of Chapter 4, *Speak for Yourself.* I will demonstrate that *Speak for Yourself* pushes the conservative politics of its parent company NewsCorp while also responding to the increasingly political activism of athletes and coaches in the era of Trump, extending the racial tensions present on *First Take* while actively discrediting the political activity of athletes and coaches.

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CHAPTER 4

"SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE": FOX SPORTS 1, INTRA-RACIAL TENSION, AND "STICKING TO SPORTS" IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

> FOX is the right place for creative, bold risks-takers (sic). The team Jamie is putting together… is bold and fearless.
>
> -Jason Whitlock, 2016.[1]

Introduction

Fox Sports 1 (FS1) launched in 2013 as a competitor to ESPN, expanding Rupert Murdoch's global NewsCorp media empire into the 24-hour cable television sports market. FS1 aimed to capture a share of the sports fan demographic to supplement the audiences served by fellow NewsCorp cable channels Fox News and FX. In 2016, after years of posting lower ratings than rival ESPN, FS1 produced and promoted several debate programs emulating the format of ESPN's highly successful debate programs *First Take* and *Pardon the Interruption*. FS1 emulated these programs directly by hiring former ESPN executive and *First Take* producer Jamie Horowitz as an executive in charge of programming. Horowitz in turn signed Colin Cowherd and Jason Whitlock in 2015 and Skip Bayless in 2016. All three men were established pundits across ESPN's radio, television, and Internet properties. Horowitz's attempts to recreate *First Take* on FS1 spoke not only to the influence of *First Take* on the sports punditry genre, but also to the continuing moment of cultural and political polarization in 2016. The backdrop of the 2016 Presidential election amplified the acrimonious rhetoric of the Tea Party from years earlier, aiding sports debate programs which featured the same outrage discourse in their quest to find and build audiences. In 2016, FS1 developed two concurrent *First Take*-inspired programs: *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* and *Speak For Yourself*, with a similar program, *First Things First*, debuting on FS1 in 2017.

All of these shows reproduced *First Take's* basic feel and format while simultaneously amplifying the ongoing cultural, racial, and gendered polarization associated with the Tea Party and, later, Trumpism. Horowitz explained FS1's strategy of emphasizing opinions over breaking news in a 2016 interview with *The Sporting News,* claiming that news-focused programs like ESPN's *SportsCenter* are "dinosaurs" and that television is entering an age of "opinionists."[2] Horowitz revealed that he wanted to build FS1 around these "opinionists" to create an "incisive" network. Specifically, he envisioned *Speak for Yourself (SFY)* as a program featuring "Two thoughtful guys (Cowherd and Whitlock) in a format that allows them to say incisive things that other people hadn't considered or weren't exposed to."[3] This shift in programming mirrors the popularity of highly rated pundit shows on fellow NewsCorp channel, Fox News, as well as popular pundit programs on MSNBC and CNN.

ESPN's domination of the broadcast rights market for live sports also drove FS1's pundit-centric rebranding strategy, as Fox could not break up this virtual monopoly of broadcast rights held by ESPN. Major sports viewing rights contracts are negotiated decades in advance and are usually worth billions of dollars, making these monopolies held by companies like ESPN even more ironclad. Explaining his counter-programming strategy, Horowitz observed that FS1's "sister network," Fox News, "positioned itself as provocative and opinion-oriented," expressing hope that "Fox Sports 1 can take a similar track."[4] This focus on "incisive" punditry and comparison to Fox News implies that the pundits featured on FS1 needed to emulate but simultaneously out-"hot take" their peers at ESPN in a similar manner to Fox News' rivalry with MSNBC and CNN. FS1 kept the Black/white male debate pairings of *Pardon the Interruption* and *First Take* in place for *Undisputed* and *Speak for Yourself*, reproducing ESPN's formulas and nominally diversifying the presumed whiteness of the sports pundit.

This chapter focuses on *Speak for Yourself* (2016-), continuing the thread of racial and gender politics in televised sports punditry, while also analyzing how the program exemplifies a turn toward more overt politicization and conservatism in the genre. *Speak For Yourself* builds on the racial politics of *First Take* by using racial tension to sell sports debate to viewers with a multiracial all-male debate desk of Colin Cowherd and Jason Whitlock, who identify as white and Black, respectively. In a manner similar to *First Take*, *SFY* deploys Whitlock to discredit politically active Black athletes like Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James in favor of upholding Coakley's "great sport myth" of sport as a colorblind meritocracy, minimizing issues of contemporary racism and ongoing inequalities.[5] However, it differs from *First Take*, and departs further from *Pardon the Interruption*, in that the racial tension is not expressed between the pair of pundits, but rather aimed at the outside world of sports and sports media, decrying the prevalence of politically active athletes and coaches. Whitlock also distinguishes *SFY* from *PTI* and *First Take* by representing intraracial tensions, as many of the program's Black guest panelists often vehemently disagreed with Whitlock's conservative views on race in America.

I therefore argue that *SFY* acts in part as a battlefield for the struggle of defining Black representation in sports media, in particular for sports punditry. Specifically, I contend that Whitlock distinguishes himself from Smith's and Wilbon's previously discussed performances of Black masculinity in televised sports punditry through his enthusiastic embrace of Black conservatism. In this way, *SFY* carves a niche in cable sports television as a distinctively conservative rhetorical arena. I argue further that Whitlock's conservative persona serves the interests of NewsCorp more broadly, and FS1 specifically, by injecting political conservatism into the nominally apolitical space of sports television as a means of offering an alternative to ESPN for potential viewers.

This chapter closely reads *SFY's* treatment of the issue of NFL Players' protests opposing police brutality during the National Anthem, and Colin Kaepernick's protests in particular. Coverage of the protests also occurred on political news channels like Fox News and CNN, as negative conservative responses to the protests ranging from right-wing media to the White House became central talking points on other NewsCorp properties, obscuring the protests' focus on police brutality. The debates on *Speak for Yourself* connect to broader discourses on race and popular culture in 2016 and beyond, as the program's debates became more directly political than other programs by addressing Trump and the athletes who opposed him. This occurred in response to the Trump administration feuding with various athletes and coaches from the NFL and NBA. These interventions by Trump, in turn, voiced racial grievances in an environment driven by the necessity of outrage discourse and outlandish statements to cut through an oversaturated marketplace of opinions and commentary brought on by the "narrowcasting" era of cable sports television. I also continue Chapter 3's focus on LeBron James as a stand-in for discussions of Black masculinity in popular culture, showing change and continuity across subsequent political movements as James took on more overtly political and anti-Trump stances in the latter part of the decade.

FS1's New Identity and creating *Speak For Yourself*

Announcing the launch of *Speak for Yourself*, FS1 executive Charlie Dixon lauded what he termed a "dynamic chemistry between Colin [Cowherd] and Jason [Whitlock]," highlighting that "they see sports through very different lenses and they don't always agree." Dixon suggested that the network sought a "difference of perspective that we think will make *Speak For Yourself*

entertaining and though-provoking to the viewer."[6] Dixon's comments on seeking a different perspective through programming reflect the aforementioned realities of the "narrowcasting" era, implying that FS1's success required a distinguishing alteration of *First Take* and *Pardon the Interruption's* conventions of debate. The development of these shows, as well as subsequent shows like *SFY,* exemplifies what Michael Serazio terms the "hot-take industrial complex" in sport media, in which sport media is pressured into cultivating extreme opinions from pundits by both the necessity of producing more output in the digital media landscape and decreasing access to athletes and coaches from reporters.[7] The *Chicago Tribune* termed FS1's new direction of shows such as *SFY* "a nose-dive into the world of sports debate and opinion…" and wrote that Horowitz was responsible for popularizing "screech-and-preach programming" on sports television dating back to *First Take*.[8] FS1 differentiated its brand from rival ESPN not by offering a different programming style, but rather by adding some of ESPN's (and sports media's) loudest and most provocative pundits. In so doing, FS1 gave these pundits platforms to attract both fans and detractors to the network in their quest to become the loudest—and, by default, male—sports opinion voice, just as Fox News did with its political punditry programs.

Horowitz promoted Cowherd and Whitlock's pairing on *SFY* as "thought-provoking and insightful," which, Horowitz explained, "really is the bullseye" for FS1's programming. He added: "They're not going to hit it every day, with every comment, with every show. But that's where you're aiming. That's where you want to be."[9] Similar to Fox News' launch two decades earlier, Horowitz theorized that the way to beat a network with much larger resources and more live broadcast rights was to cut through an oversaturated cable market was with polemical, pundit-driven programs capable of attracting both fanatical viewers and people Jonathan Gray

terms "anti-fans," keeping the network itself in the news with their opinionated commentary, whether the responses were positive or negative.[10]

FS1's promotion of *SFY* and other pundit-driven programs as pillars of their programming occurred for several reasons. First, the Trump era represented the culmination and ascension of the Tea Party's reactionary racial, gender, and nationalist politics, all of which influenced *First Take's* tone and presentation. Trump won the presidency in 2016 following a campaign marked by rhetoric demonizing immigrants, Muslims, women, and any outsiders to his white and largely male base.[11] Second, many athletes during this time period expressed explicit anti-Trump sentiments, and the increased conflict between Trump and numerous athletes created space for discussion outside the standard on-field sport debate topics. Third, FS1's predilection for punditry mirrored the male rage of established stars of the political punditry genre on other Fox properties such as Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, Lou Dobbs, and Tucker Carlson. *SFY* and similar programs on FS1 drew from contemporary political pundit shows in a manner similar to ESPN Original Entertainment programs adopting conventions of cable contemporaries such as reality television and documentary filmmaking nearly two decades prior.[12]

Like Bayless and Smith on *First Take*, Cowherd and Whitlock carried a long history of producing "hot takes" into their tenures on *SFY*. Cowherd, a longtime radio host, crafted a deliberately polemical and provocative public image, primarily via his nationally syndicated radio program *The Herd with Colin Cowherd* (ESPN, 2008-2015, FS1 2015-). His 2013 book, *You Herd Me!: I'll Say It If Nobody Else Will,* features a shirtless Cowherd in boxing shorts with plastic arrows affixed to his body as if he had been shot. The religious implications of the cover cast Cowherd as the Christian icon Saint Sebastian, as though his controversial opinions made him a martyr to society. This continues Chapter 3's analysis of the sports pundit becoming the

white male figure whose defense of whiteness and masculinity casts him as heroic or courageous.[13] This posturing was also a direct reference to Muhammad Ali's April 1968 *Esquire* cover in which he was photographed by George Lois in a similar position paying homage to the martyred saint.[14] However, instead of Ali's fake arrows and blood, Cowherd was affixed with plastic toy arrows. By pretending to be a modern-day Ali, Cowherd's posturing equates his penchant for "hot takes" with Ali's stands for civil rights and antiwar activism, paradoxically positioning himself as a dangerous outsider despite his employment at a mainstream sports media outlet. In reclaiming Black activism as white male victimhood, Cowherd casts punditry as a dangerous, confrontational, and heroic medium for white men to express their opinions on sports played by predominantly nonwhite athletes, while also deflating their achievements.

Cowherd worked previously with Jamie Horowitz at ESPN on *SportsNation,* a show in which he and female cohost Michelle Beadle asked poll questions to viewers and revealed the online results in real time. Cowherd ultimately chose not to re-sign with ESPN in the wake of a controversy in which he expressed the racist viewpoint that Dominican players had achieved success in Major League Baseball despite his contention that "the Dominican Republic has not been known in my lifetime as having world class academic abilities."[15] Cowherd's racist commentary on Dominican players and the fact that his program was quickly picked up by a rival network in FS1 illustrates the industrial and economic value of the angry white male sports pundit. Signing Cowherd contributes to Horowitz's previously stated goal of branding FS1 as a network of incisive opinionists, with Cowherd's polemical and racist commentary serving as both his own personal brand and as part of the network's brand. While his racist comments certainly contributed to his exit from ESPN, Cowherd's new deal with Fox Sports demonstrates that the potential for viewership, even from "hate-watchers," outweighed the negative

associations of racism to sports television executives. Indeed, at the time of his network switch, *The Hollywood Reporter* dubbed Cowherd one of the "ten most powerful voices in sports." This designation was due in part to his immense popularity as a radio host (he averaged nearly 2.5 million daily listeners) and what the magazine termed his "smarts and impatience for sports figures who cough up platitudes."[16]

Upon signing with FS1, Cowherd praised the location of FS1's studios in Los Angeles as a "creative mecca," adding that he wanted to work with "'writers and producers and different types of people that were very difficult to access in Bristol.'" Cowherd lamented that "'the culture at ESPN, I found when I left, isn't the same as when I came…It wasn't as much fun.'"[17] This concept of FS1 differing culturally from ESPN, even while the former lifted both program ideas and personnel from the latter, speaks to a channel-wide image crafting of FS1 as less politically correct and buttoned up than ESPN. ESPN executive Burke Magnus commented on FS1's shift in September of 2016, contending that FS1 "made a big mistake in abandoning journalism and abandoning news and information completely for all debate," while also noting that ESPN saw their debate programs as one part of "an array of offerings including SportsCenter, live events and storytelling like *E:60* and *30 for 30*."[18] Magnus dismissed FS1's posturing and moves like erecting billboards of Bayless near ESPN headquarters in Bristol, Connecticut, as "another example of style over substance," while *Sports Illustrated* writer Richard Dietsch termed it "an artful bit of trolling.[19] In a similar vein to Fox News' adversarial relationship with CNN and MSNBC, FS1 defined itself as antiestablishment by delivering charged and opinionated commentary in opposition to ESPN's vast array of news programs and live event coverage. In addition to starring on *SFY*, Cowherd continued to host his nationally

broadcast radio program, *The Herd with Colin Cowherd*, now simulcast on FS1, Fox Sports Radio, and the Internet, demonstrating a continued synergy of punditry across various media.

Paralleling the popular contempt of Cowherd, Whitlock commanded similar levels of vitriol from both readers and fellow journalists. A former college football player at Ball State University, Whitlock worked for years as a columnist, primarily with the *Kansas City Star*, prior to joining FS1. The *Columbia Journalism Review* christened Whitlock "the most provocative and controversial sports columnist in mid-America," noting further that he "has alternately enthralled and appalled" readers.[20] He also wrote for ESPN, AOL Sports, and Fox Sports in addition to his primary duties as a columnist for the *Star*. Whitlock was no stranger to televised sports punditry, previously serving as an occasional guest panelist on *The Sports Reporters* and filling in frequently for either Kornheiser or Wilbon on *Pardon the Interruption.*

Perhaps Whitlock's most notable controversy surrounded his commentary in the wake of Don Imus' racist rants in 2007 against the Rutgers University women's basketball team. Rather than placing the blame solely on Imus, Whitlock appeared on numerous programs, including MSNBC's *Tucker* starring conservative pundit Tucker Carlson, to claim that the real underlying issue was with Black hip hop culture, arguing that if rap music didn't encourage use of those terms, then Imus wouldn't have used such language. Specifically, Whitlock claimed that notable Black civil rights leaders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were "terrorists" who "started fires and create[d] divisiveness" in the wake of the Imus scandal.[21] On the basis of such statements and other similar remarks, Whitlock has been brandished by many critics as an "Uncle Tom" for his conservative views and anti-Black commentary.[22] Whitlock's overt conservatism and antipathy toward hip-hop and other elements of Black youth culture led him to derisively be christened a

"real-life Uncle Ruckus," a reference to the self-hating Black antagonist appearing in Aaron McGruder's satirical cartoon series *The Boondocks*.[23]

Whitlock's stances on contemporary racism illustrates what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms the "abstract liberalism" framework used to deny ongoing racism. This particular frame involves someone blaming the individual or collective efforts of minorities for racialized disparities in income and social equity. Whitlock's words embody this frame by using ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism to justify the racial status quo and explain racial gaps in wealth and social positioning.[24] His excoriation of rap music as an explanation for the abhorrent comments of Don Imus, however, additionally voices elements of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms "cultural racism," which is defined as "a frame that relies on culturally based arguments…to explain the standings of minorities in society."[25] Whitlock represents a male Black elder dissatisfied with the culture of a younger generation of Black voices that simultaneously gives white and conservative critics of Black culture rhetorical ammunition in their quest to justify enduring racial inequalities.

Whitlock's anti-hip-hop rhetoric stands in for a broader history of Black conservatism, particularly on matters of morality. Charles P. Henry notes that one of the most significant branches of the Black conservative movement operates in lockstep with a broader religious right that is "prone to questioning the cultural values emerging from the sixties."[26] While Whitlock frequently lauds popular civil rights figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, his derision of other Black nationalists and frequent appeals to religiosity over social consciousness echo this preexisting strand of Black conservatism. This conservatism emerges from a broader philosophy of American exceptionalism which, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor contends, "operates as a mythology of convenience that does a tremendous amount of work to simplify the

contradiction between the apparent creed of US society and its much more complicated reality."[27] During *SFY's* run on television, numerous Black conservative voices emerged on political television, a group that included presidential candidate Dr. Ben Carson, Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson, and Milwaukee Sherriff David Clarke. Colleen E. Mills argues that Fox News provided a platform for these conservative Black voices to discredit victims of police brutality like Michael Brown, placing them alongside controversial white figures like Mark Fuhrman to "portray [Officer Darren] Wilson as the 'real' victim."[28] Whitlock's continuous presence as a Black conservative in sports media, then, echoes the simultaneous popularity of these Black conservative political figures with white and conservative television audiences.

Despite this lengthy history of inciting controversy and advocating racial conservatism, Whitlock was commissioned by ESPN in 2013 to helm their project known as *The Undefeated.* The project was envisioned as a website focusing on Blackness, sports, and popular culture in a way similar to ESPN's *Grantland*, a fact made clear by *The Sporting News* referring to the project as "Black Grantland."[29] Whitlock was ultimately asked by ESPN to leave *The Undefeated* in 2015 prior to its public launch. No official explanation was given for Whitlock and ESPN's decision to "mutually part ways," but unofficial explanations ranged from personality conflicts to management styles to political disputes.[30] Whitlock's charged feuds with numerous Black liberal, politically active writers such as Shaun King and Ta-Nehisi Coates upheld his iconoclastic status as a distinctive conservative Black voice in sports media.

The presence and vision of Horowitz linked *SFY* back to the racial politics of *First Take* and, to a lesser extent, *Pardon the Interruption.* While producing *First Take*, Horowitz concluded that "'Some viewers genuinely hate Skip and Stephen A…but they also watch them." This philosophy was summarized by the *New York Times,* which wrote that to Horowitz, "the

only currency that mattered at 'First Take' was attention…it didn't matter why you watched or what you thought of the program, as long as 'First Take' was on your TV."[31] In hiring pundits known to antagonize readers and listeners of their work as central programming stars, FS1 took this strategy to new heights. Horowitz also placed reliance on controversial and opinionated pundits in a Newscorp-wide strategy to gain audiences through performances of conservative commentary and content. Curiously, he specifically cited Fox programs like *The Simpsons* and *The Bernie Mac Show* or FX network programs like *Louie* and *The People vs. O.J. Simpson* as Fox properties that established a history of defying accepted standards and practices of television content, even as these programs drew the ire of some conservative activists.[32] This cross-network branding of NewsCorp properties as controversial and boundary-pushing extended their brand as culturally relevant and edgy across multiple channels and genres during an increasing era of narrowcasting. Fox, more so than its competitors, pursued controversy across its channels as an identity, whether through news and pundit programs, scripted dramas, or irreverent cartoons. FS1's pundit programs featuring Cowherd, Whitlock, and Bayless, therefore, were a logical extension of this branding strategy privileging polemics and conservatism as central features of the NewsCorp brand across properties.

Contextualizing the Racial and Gender Politics of the Trump Era

Beginning in 2015, a year before *SFY's* launch on FS1, the candidacy and the eventual administration of Donald Trump amplified public fissures concerning racial and national identity in American culture and discourse that had remained invisible to some, especially—but not exclusively—middle class whites. Trump's campaign voiced a steady stream of white racist and

xenophobic grievances, ranging from his initial campaign announcement in which he labeled Mexican immigrants as people who are "bringing drugs, bringing crime, they're rapists," and called for a complete shutdown of immigration from majority Muslim nations as an anti-terrorism measure.[33] Trump won a narrow electoral victory due in part to what Karin Wahl-Jorgensen refers to as Trump's performances of "angry populism…based on a rhetoric which seeks broad appeal through the deliberate expression of anger."[34]

Trump's stoking of white male rage through his campaign speeches and policies had a ready-made partner in the pervasively white and male space of talk radio hosts and listeners. Given that many popular talk radio hosts like Sean Hannity and Mark Levin were ardent conservatives employed by Newscorp, Trump's speeches resonated with listeners of these programs. Audiences of these pundits relished outrage discourse and dog whistling racist language from these hosts, some of whom also starred on Fox News television programs such as *Hannity* and *Life, Liberty, and Levin*. Trump himself acknowledged this connection by appearing on their shows and accepting endorsements from these hosts and eventually awarding Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2020. In a profile on *The Ringer* connecting Trump and Cowherd's rhetoric, Bryan Curtis wrote that during Trump's campaign, "Trump delivered stump speeches that were basically an hour's worth of id," adding that "Cowherd does the same with his show."[35] However, even though Cowherd did not have the same explicitly conservative political stances as Trump or his supporters in the conservative talk radio scene, Cowherd and Trump were nevertheless lumped together as being tonally and rhetorically similar by *The Ringer*. Such a comparison genders outrage discourse and radio performances of rage as masculine traits, with conservatism serving as another marker of this angry white masculinity.

Trump's reliance on directly racist rhetoric accelerated the erosion of post-racial visions in popular American discourse, an erosion ignited by the rise of the Tea Party and racially rooted opposition to the Obama administration. Catherine R. Squires notes that this trend began as early as 2009, when "conservative commentators were priming the pump to accuse Obama of reverse racism and playing the race card—a very un-post-racial kind of politics."[36] Trump himself led the "birther" movement accusing Obama of not being born in the United States and thereby ineligible to serve as President. This reliance on white victimization and casting Black activism as reverse racism laid groundwork for Trump's appeals to white grievances in his platforms and campaign speeches, furthering the tidal wave of anti-Obama sentiments coming from the Tea Party and conservative politicians. It was in this environment that overtly partisan news outlets such as Breitbart, The Blaze, and Vox extended their visibility. These fringe media companies experienced expanded success not just in terms of greater traffic and distribution, but also in terms of political influence. For example, after Trump's election, several Breitbart staffers, including Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, were given positions in the White House, bringing a deliberately anti-establishment and far-right organization firmly into the mainstream of American political discourse.[37] As further evidence of this shift, the Trump Administration formally reached out to right wing outlets such as Breitbart and The Daily Caller at the 2017 White House Correspondent's Dinner, arguing that conservative outlets "'were neglected the last eight years'" during the Obama Administration.[38]

Trump's inflammatory and racist rhetoric was endorsed enthusiastically by the new, primarily online-based "alt-right" conservative movement. Falcous et al. argue that some of the tenets of alt-right philosophy include "the primacy of 'Western civilization' and/or 'Christian' values…" and "…hostility toward mainstream 'liberal' elites in politics, academia, and media."[39]

This scorn of elitism and an alleged liberal bias in media extended to sports media, despite the fact that scholars describe "mainstream" sports media as "essentially conservative in nature, aligning with dominant cultural politics, and hence tending to reinforce extant social relations."[40] These arguments against liberal politics in sports media created a space for a rightward-leaning figure such as Whitlock to stand out as a voice speaking against the encroachment of liberalism into sports.

Throughout his candidacy and tenure as president, Trump actively inserted himself into the sporting world. A former athlete in prep school, Trump at one point owned the New Jersey Generals, a USFL (United States Football League) franchise, and even attempted to purchase the NFL's Buffalo Bills prior to his presidential run. As a presidential candidate, he sought to enmesh himself into the world of sports by securing endorsements and rally appearances from sports figures such as legendary college basketball coach Bobby Knight to football coaches such as Mike Leach, Lou Holtz, and Rex Ryan. In one campaign speech, Trump railed against the current state of football, claiming that "football has become soft like our country has become soft."[41] Trump intervened in the sporting realm further in 2017 by sharply criticizing NFL players who knelt during the National Anthem to protest police brutality against African Americans. While speaking at a campaign stop in Alabama, Trump referred to kneeling NFL players as "sons of bitches" and later tweeted that "NFL players who don't stand for the anthem should be 'fired.'"[42] These racist tirades targeting a largely Black pool of NFL players created swift responses from both NFL players and owners, shifting the focus from ongoing police brutality to anti-Trump sentiments. This anti-Trump sentiment from owners occurred despite the fact that a majority of NFL owners provided financial support to Trump's election campaign.[43] The seeming erosion of long-unspoken boundaries between sports and politics during this time

continued through Whitlock's frequent appearances on numerous other non-sports NewsCorp programs. These included programs on Fox Business and *Tucker Carlson Tonight,* allowing Whitlock not to just appear as an authoritative voice in sports, but also as an authority on race, politics, and popular culture.

Continuing his performances of hypermasculinity, Trump made a more direct appeal to his male base when defending comments leaked from a 2005 *Access Hollywood* tape in which he graphically described committing sexual assault. As a means of damage control, Trump dismissed the comments as not being serious, claiming he was simply engaging in what he termed "locker room talk." This gendering of Trump's past comments signaled a popular understanding of both sports and locker rooms as male spaces, as well as misogyny and assault being essential parts of male sporting culture. Adding to this understanding, Emily A. Thorson and Michael Serazio note that sports fandom tends to be associated with several nominally conservative political positions, such as strong support for the military and a belief that individual effort determines economic success.[44] Both authors also note that the primary complaints of politics interloping into sports now come from conservative critics, who seemingly ignore or excuse Trump's frequent anti-liberal intrusions into the sporting arena.

Connecting Trump back to *SFY*, Whitlock partially defended Trump's usage of "locker room talk" on an October 13, 2016 episode of the program. Specifically, Whitlock said that "when men get together…every time you add an additional man, the IQ goes down," to which Cowherd laughed and said "yes, it does." Whitlock then recounted how he and his college teammates would flash cleaning ladies who wandered into the locker room.[45] Both hosts, however, made clear that they weren't defending Trump's comments or endorsing his statements, thereby maintaining *SFY's* superficially apolitical branding. But they nevertheless

reduced it to a laughing matter. Programs like *SFY* reinforce what Sarah Banet-Weiser terms "popular misogyny," which reacts to a threat of women "taking over space, jobs, desire, families, childrearing, and power."[46] The male solidarity on programs like *SFY*, then, acts as a site of popular misogyny, keeping the program, and thereby televised sports punditry, as a male preserve free from a supposedly ongoing and all-encompassing feminizing influence eroding at other segments of popular entertainment.

While *First Take* and *PTI* also practiced this reification of male privilege, the gendered politics of the Trump era and the subsequent backlash against the gains of third wave feminism occur through Cowherd and Whitlock's defenses of sport as a site of conservative value-making on *SFY*. Whitlock reiterated the concept of sports as a keeper of "traditional" values in a 2017 interview with *the Sporting News*, stating that "the values taught and celebrated in sports are conservative," but that "the far left wants to change that…they want sports to have a liberal impact."[47] Whitlock adopts a pseudo-populist stance reminiscent of Trump by arguing that traditional, conservative values in institutions like sports are under siege from a nebulous liberal elite. While the nominal values defended by these pundits were coded as politically neutral traits such as selflessness, teamwork, and developing a hard work ethic, their analyses overlooked the long history of sexism promoted and upheld by amateur and professional sports. In defending the concept of "locker room talk," *SFY* not only reflected a moment of cultural and political male backlash, but also defended hegemonic masculinity in sports and sport media more generally.

Flipping the Script: Confronting Racism, Politically Active Black Athletes and Colin Kaepernick

Whereas Whitlock unapologetically railed against liberalism and its supposedly ill effects on Black America, Cowherd's performances on *SFY* rarely endorsed or defended specific political positions or individual politicians. Instead, they were anti-political in his defense of sports' role in maintaining the status quo, which is by nature a political stance. Whenever Whitlock blasted athletes as being "out of touch" or doing the bidding of mysterious "elites," Cowherd typically defended the athletes' rights to self-expression while simultaneously lamenting that sports had become politicized. A representative example of this dynamic between the two pundits occurred on a September 29, 2016 program. Both men were discussing Richard Sherman's apparent distrust of NFL ownership and league management. Whitlock began by claiming that he really liked and respected Sherman but lamented that "he's a part of this millennial generation that thinks being woke means everything above you is evil…and you can't trust it." Whitlock then blasted Sherman for complaining about working conditions in the NFL, exclaiming "most employees don't get paid generational wealth for performing," adding that "these billionaires are turning these athletes into millionaires."[48]

Cowherd rebutted that these privileges of high salary and security only applied to certain positions at each sport, arguing that "billionaires take care of millionaires that they *have to* take care of [emphasis added]." Whitlock interrupted, claiming that Sherman will "leave the NFL having made 60-80 million…that's a damn good living! He started in Compton."[49] Cowherd rebuffed these claims to a point, noting the NFL's botched handling of CTE crisis, and that the league continuously demands more games of its players without proportional revenue increases. Whitlock defended the NFL as an organization that "takes care of 53" players of each roster and

"has a dramatic revenue sharing, which is very socialistic." Whitlock then slammed "all these young millennials," claiming that "they're influenced by this social Marxist hyper-left-wing mindset." He interjected that "The NFL lives this [socialism] out…67% African American…that's a lot of people they're taking care of!" Cowherd concluded that NFL players were likely jealous of NBA players who made more guaranteed money before reluctantly supporting Whitlock's point about the fruitlessness of NFL labor complaints, noting a shorter season for NFL players than other major professional sports.[50]

On its surface, Whitlock and Cowherd's exchange on this topic represents oppositional viewpoints, with Whitlock siding with management (the NFL) and Cowherd nominally defending labor (Sherman). Whitlock envisioned the NFL not as a soulless corporation, but rather as a job creator, echoing conservative rhetoric about economic growth and opportunity. Casting Sherman as being wrong for his suspicion of NFL ownership also hearkened back to the trope of the "ungrateful Black millionaire athlete," which, Jelani Cobb argues, represents a rearticulation of the "uppity" slur applied to politically active Black Americans in decades past.[51] Cowherd's role in this exchange, while giving some defense to Sherman and other NFL skeptics, ultimately reinforces the concept of separation between athletes and fans by focusing on their salaries and a concept of only "elite" athletes being taken care of by the league.

In flipping the stereotypes of white conservatism and Black liberalism by having Whitlock antagonize liberal Black voices decrying police brutality and the racism of the Trump administration, FS1 and *SFY* shielded themselves from accusations of racism. They accomplished this by implying that if these criticisms were coming from a Black voice, then they were not as racially charged as conservative white-on-Black criticisms. Specifically, Whitlock's rhetoric reinforced visions of sport—and American society more broadly—as a colorblind

meritocracy whose racial inequalities were explainable by cultural or individual failings rather than as the product of ongoing systemic racism. Whitlock's performances also embody what Taylor identifies as a representative of the "Black middle class that…politically discipline[s] poorer African Americans while also rehabilitating the idea that everyone could prosper in the United States."[52]

Whereas *First Take* represented racial tensions as implicit through on-court confrontations or in interracial critiques by broadcasters, *Speak for Yourself* responds to the overt racism of the Trump era more directly, as politics and sports were seen in stark opposition to one another in contrast to the feel-good ethos of *PTI* and, to a lesser extent, *First Take*. For example, whereas Bayless or Smith focused on intangible elements of athletes' performances like "the will to win," "leadership," or "the clutch gene," *SFY* instead positioned athletes as "out of touch" or, in Whitlock's words, "elites," when they spoke about political issues from liberal, anti-Trump perspectives. *SFY* also depicts sport as a distinctively male terrain. In addition to a majority of the debates centering on the NFL and the NBA, the program does not even have the tokenized position of a female moderator present on *First Take* and *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed.* Cowherd and Whitlock, whether wittingly or unwittingly, echoed the hypermasculinity of the Trump era, reclaiming sport media as male terrain in a manner similar to Trump's warnings against the "soft" influences threatening both football and the United States. Emerging from the interracial buddy-cop mentality of *Pardon the Interruption* and the exaggerated WWE-like masculinity of *First Take*, *SFY* projected a more Trumpian air of masculinity as the two pundits raged against a changing sports landscape and its allegedly liberal and feminine influences.

As a response to its thinly veiled conservative stylings, *SFY* was christened mockingly by liberal-leaning sports blog *Deadspin* as "All Takes Matter," repurposing the "All Lives Matter"

conservative response to the #BlackLivesMatter movement against police brutality.[53] Trump's feuds with numerous Black athletes such as Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James, and some white NBA coaches like Steve Kerr and Gregg Popovich was counterbalanced by his endorsement from numerous sports figures. This set the stage for *SFY's* debates to include more than just the debates about historical rankings of contemporary athletes and game recaps which dominated *First Take*. Focusing on James and Kaepernick as primary examples is appropriate here due to their wider cultural relevance. Kaepernick's protests drew reactions from all sectors of media and effectively barred him from future NFL employment, whereas James remained a cultural icon beyond his role as an NBA superstar.

On an August 29, 2016 episode of *SFY* airing immediately following Kaepernick's protests, both pundits took competing negative stances toward Kaepernick. Cowherd opened the segment by claiming that while he supported Kaepernick's right to protest, the NFL preseason, in which Kaepernick first sat during the National Anthem, was akin to "a job interview," and then asked "when's the last time in a job interview you brought up politics?"[54] Cowherd went on to explain that he likes quarterbacks to be "laser focused…borderline obsessed…all about football," and that his opinions aligned with those of great football coaches like Bill Belichick, Nick Saban, and Urban Meyer.[55] Whitlock then interjected when Cowherd noted that people had begun comparing Kaepernick to Muhammad Ali, arguing that "we're not in the 1960s, or even in the 1970s…athletes today, like Colin Kaepernick, make so much money, they have so much wealth and power. The power isn't in gestures, it's in real actions and investments." Both pundits then praised LeBron James' charitable contributions to his hometown of Akron, Ohio as a more praiseworthy action than Kaepernick's anthem protest.

Finally, Whitlock went on to state that police brutality "is not our issue as African Americans," noting that he personally had lost a family member to police brutality before identifying "mass incarceration…the destruction of the Black family and the family in America…corporate greed…" and the "destruction of unions and the working class" as more important issues to African Americans.[56] Whitlock finally dismissed police brutality as "Twitter stuff," contending that police brutality costs the government money in lawsuits and it is therefore not a desirable outcome for the state.[57] Whitlock's appeals to apolitical Black identity on *Speak For Yourself* echo Booker T. Washington's call for Black people to cast down their buckets, as Whitlock appealed for players to take less overt political action in favor of both personal and communal financial self-uplifting.

Whitlock's rhetoric justifies both racial and political status quos, promoting instead the "personal responsibility" ethos of contemporary conservatism in his denial of widespread police brutality. This also embodies what Angela K. Lewis identifies as one of the ideals of modern Black conservatism. Specifically, Whitlock uses his positionality to promote the ideal that "the American system is set up to treat everyone equally and that everyone has an equal opportunity for success," a system where "efforts…made to discriminate…are futile because this is America."[58] Whitlock's presumption of American exceptionalism in terms of racial equality allows him to uphold tenets of colorblind racism via his praise for the ideals of American capitalism and society, instead representing what Lee Walker terms Black conservatism's "centrality of character and values."[59]

Cowherd's commentary on the issue remained less political than Whitlock's, as he did not disagree with Kaepernick's opinions on police brutality, but rather repeated an apparent apolitical positioning that politics and sports should not mix. In pairing moderate and

conservative voices as unified in their opposition to Kaepernick's protests, *SFY* and FS1 pushed the conversation on the issue further to the political right under the guise of moderation and centrism. *Speak for Yourself* advances Newscorp's conservative agenda in less overt and partisan ways than Fox News, but nevertheless promotes stances which serve to court segmented audiences of conservative sports fans and, specifically, Trump supporters by approaching widely discussed issues from a right-leaning standpoint. Evidence of this tactic came in a 2016 interview with *The Sporting News*, where Whitlock claimed:

> I think we're the alternative for sports fans who respect and like traditional sports values…I think we're the alternative for people who want to hear authentic conversation and debate rather than words crafted for Twitter applause. I think we're the alternative for middle America, blue-collar sports fans. I think we're the alternative for people who don't think every misspoken word is a fireable offense. ESPN caters to the elite, safe-space crowd. We cater to the people who love to tailgate and knock down a six-pack. That is strictly my opinion.[60]

Whitlock's quote illuminates the ways that conservatism is coded through *SFY's* association of "sports values" as an anti-politically correct, "blue collar" space. His reliance on tropes of hegemonic masculinity like tailgating and beer consumption code the program's audience as male and conservative.

In a September 1, 2016 segment, both Cowherd and Whitlock railed against Kaepernick wearing socks depicting police officers as pigs to a team practice. Cowherd described it as an "immature act," and suggested that Kaepernick "doesn't have football on his mind," decrying what he saw as Kaepernick disregarding a "work environment practice, work environment stadium," lamenting that "once again, he [Kaepernick] goes activist." Whitlock described the act as "everything that is wrong with this society." Whitlock contended that Kaepernick was turning police brutality into a "hot take," arguing that "people have taken…some tragic incidents and tried to paint the entire police force as out to get Black people."[61] Whitlock's message minimized

the racism of police in America by shifting the focus from Kaepernick's anti-police violence message into debating the appropriateness of its delivery via the socks. It also took attention off of the ongoing racial disparities in arrests and stops by police, instead casting Kaepernick as an individual bad actor whose method of delivery obscured the message he was trying to convey.

Cowherd occasionally opposed Whitlock's thinking and defended Kaepernick in segments, including one that aired on September 13, 2016. In this segment, Cowherd argued that Kaepernick's protests were successful in bringing awareness to police brutality, noting that President Obama acknowledged his protests, and that creating awareness "is his [Kaepernick's] fundraiser…to some degree that's what stars do, they create momentum and awareness."[62] Whitlock retorted by Kaepernick was playing "checkers [not chess] on the most divisive and, in my view, most important topic in American history," arguing that it was not enough to just raise awareness. Cowherd countered that "you have a right to protest, even if you're not completely absolutely buttoned up, and don't have a complete game plan… I don't expect a 26-year-old quarterback to be Jim Brown the activist."

Despite these qualifiers, Whitlock cautioned that "this issue [police brutality] is so important that not everybody should just run in and do it, because it's dangerous."[63] Cowherd interrupted and protested that Whitlock was seeking "perfection" from Kaepernick, while Whitlock then pivoted to an explanation that mass incarceration was the root cause and then claiming he was offended by "Kaepernick and these 'internet people'" because Whitlock had lost someone in his family due to police brutality. Cowherd contended that the conversation and subsequent action—both pro- and anti-Kaepernick—represented "exactly what it should be and shows the strength of our country!" He later added that "if you only demand perfection…if you demand idealism…people should have a right to protest and miss for freedom of speech."

Whitlock concluded by arguing that Kaepernick's "entire thing is based off of Twitter…if you really understand this issue, you know how shallow this is," adding his belief that these protests are "not moving us anywhere toward a solution, they're creating conversations about Colin Kaepernick…I'm not good with it!"[64]

These conversations served two purposes for *SFY*. First, they kept Kaepernick and the anthem protests in the news, in a manner similar to the frequent debates about Lebron James and Tim Tebow on ESPN's *First Take*. Undoubtedly fueled by metrics ranging from focus groups to social media engagements on the topic, Horowitz and program producers linked *SFY* to the ongoing national debates over the protests. Second, Cowherd pushed back on Whitlock's overt conservatism without explicitly endorsing Kaepernick's positions, which were routinely lambasted on fellow NewsCorp channel Fox News. By abstractly supporting the right to protest and start conversations without assessing the validity of the claims, Cowherd helped *SFY* claim a form of mediated neutrality, balancing Whitlock's sharp critiques with a vague acceptance for the concept rather than the specific stand of police brutality. It also extended the brand identity of FS1 as a debate-centric network, positioning Whitlock's negativity toward Kaepernick alongside support from other pundits on FS1's debate shows like Shannon Sharpe. By taking a "Fair and Balanced" approach to this issue through featuring certain pundits supporting the protests while simultaneously highlighting Whitlock's outspoken anti-Kaepernick stance, FS1 and *SFY* maintained a broader market appeal but signaled to conservative viewers that their concerns would be explicitly voiced on the program.

Approximately a year later, in a scathing three-minute monologue uploaded on July 19, 2017, that gained viral internet fame, Whitlock tore into supporters of Kaepernick's protests. He sarcastically dubbed them "Capernicks" for their support of the protesting quarterback as if he

was a superhero. Whitlock accused people supporting Kaepernick of coming from an "illogical brainwashed place where Colin Kaepernick is the modern-day Nelson Mandela."[65] Whitlock went on to chastise various Kaepernick defenders in both the sports media and entertainment spheres: "if Kaepernick wants to be taken seriously and affect real change, he should project a more professional image with his appearance. If he's seeking Twitter fame and the adulation of 'Capernicks,' he should keep the afro, and continue tweeting his way to freedom."

In vociferously opposing what he saw as the ills of Kaepernick's message, Whitlock continued to brand himself as an anti-Kaepernick and anti- "P.C." pundit. Whitlock's performances channeled elements of prior Black elders, arguing that the most effective way for someone like Kaepernick to succeed was to focus more on colorblind terms like "respectability" and "professionalism." This mirrored other racially coded rhetoric such as the NBA's focus on enacting a "professional" dress code which targeted elements of hip-hop style amongst its predominantly Black player base.[66] On the program, Whitlock practiced a presentation style coded as a "race man" by Todd Boyd. According to Boyd, the "race man" was "a civil-rights era embodiment of what today falls under the highly contested term 'role model,'" a term Boyd argues applied to various Black male figures ranging from Booker T. Washington to a pre-2010s Bill Cosby.[67] This focus on achieving mainstream success in white society and becoming "a credit to the race" was eventually openly questioned by subsequent generations of Black men.[68] Whitlock's critique of younger Black athlete activists like Kaepernick, then, exemplifies a generational and philosophical divide among Black Americans, a divide often obscured in the wake of post-civil rights depictions of Blackness in popular media. Cowherd's coded language earlier ("I like my QBs to be laser focused") reinforced this preference from sports media

members for Black stars to be apolitical in the style of the "race man" a la Michael Jordan or Magic Johnson.

Whitlock's anti-Twitter diatribe rearticulates Tony Kornheiser's contempt for television, reinforcing the traditional hierarchy of print journalism in sport media as an old medium more fitting of cultural prestige than television and online journalism, including social media. Whitlock dismissed Kaepernick's efforts to organize voters and political action on the platform, condemning Kaepernick's propensity to communicate through retweets of what Whitlock termed "divisive political commentary."[69] Whitlock has consistently maintained his belief that Twitter, along with "Big Tech and Silicon Valley, is, as he told a Congressional committee in 2020, responsible for making "race-clickbait the gold standards of journalism."[70] However, social media, and Twitter in particular, were essential to the rise of Trump and—to a lesser extent—Kaepernick's protests. Trump prolifically used Twitter both prior to and during his presidential campaign, in addition to frequently Tweeting in office prior to his ban from the platform in January 2021 for inciting violence at the US Capitol. Trump's Twitter persona operated in a manner similar to many sports talk radio hosts, in which he berated other candidates and opponents while also appealing to the racial and gendered anger of his voting base. Through his use of Twitter, Trump represents Angelos Kissas's performative ideology of populism, in which Trump rails regularly against "a 'rigged system' that he knows inside-out" while also "targeting those who still defend it."[71]

Minimizing Trump's frequent rantings on Twitter, Whitlock instead railed against the platform's penchant for polarization and divisiveness rather than directly condemning Trump's polarizing, racist, and divisive activity on Twitter. Whitlock's criticisms then, equate Trump, whose campaign intentionally stoked anti-minority sentiments, with Kaepernick, whose protests

against anti-Black police brutality simultaneously attracted both widespread acclaim and criticism. In conflating these two figures, Whitlock pushed *SFY* into what David Theo Goldberg terms an "antiracialist" sentiment in which people who raise issues of racial inequality and ongoing systemic racism are just as problematic to supposedly moderate or conservative voices as traditional racists.[72]

LeBron James, Athlete Activism, and a New Incarnation of the "Old Head"

Due to his popularity and enduring success, LeBron James was another frequent topic on *Speak For Yourself,* in a manner similar to *First Take.* By the time of the show's premiere in 2016, James had won his third NBA title, and his first with the Cleveland Cavaliers. He also emerged as a multimedia icon in the vein of Michael Jordan, appearing in Hollywood films such as 2016's *Trainwreck* while also representing brands ranging from Nike to Sprite. James began increasingly speaking out on social issues as well, ranging from protesting the racially charged murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 by George Zimmerman to the 2016 presidential election, in which he campaigned for the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and spoke out vociferously against Donald Trump. Owning widespread popularity and increasing his political activism, James represents a relevant case study for analyzing how *SFY* confronts race and masculinity. As referenced in Chapter 3, James is frequently compared to NBA legend Michael Jordan, whom scholars mark as a postracial superstar due to his ability to appeal to Black and white audiences alike. However, James's increasing political activity, both leading up to and during the Trump presidency, set him apart from Jordan, who reportedly quipped "Republicans buy sneakers, too" to explain his comparative lack of political involvement.

In an August 14, 2017 segment of *SFY,* both pundits discussed the sporting community's reaction to the "Unite the Right" Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which white supremacist protests sparked violence. The panelists discussed a particular tweet from James in response to the violence: "It's sad what's going on in Charlottesville. Is this the direction our country is heading? Make America Great Again huh?! He said that!"[73] Cowherd initially praised James for being "sort of the voice of the players," in a manner similar to past greats such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, adding that he "would be surprised if LeBron didn't condemn it publicly."[74] Cowherd's statement expressed the popularity of James' emerging image as a liberal antiracist activist among contemporary athletes, as well as the socially progressive popular image of the NBA in the wake of its handling of racial incidents such as the Donald Sterling fiasco.[75]

In response, Whitlock said that James was "well intentioned" in his condemnation of the "tragedy" but was "completely ineffective…if your goal is to move people in the middle or expand your base or communicate with Trump supporters why supporting Trump is inappropriate." Whitlock then equated the Charlottesville violence to the assassination of four police officers in Dallas at a Black Lives Matter rally one year earlier in 2016, noting that James did not blame Obama for that instance of violence. Whitlock ultimately dismissed James' tweet as being "polarizing and divisive," arguing once more that Twitter existed "to be divisive and polarizing and to spur more of what we just saw in Charlottesville over the weekend." Whitlock then concluded that "young people have virtually no understanding of the strategy and the thought that went into changing America…the things that happened in the 60s that everybody's trying to duplicate were thought out and strategic and were about bringing people together, not about being polarizing and divisive."[76]

Cowherd protested against Whitlock's claims, arguing that Twitter was "just a space to have an opinion," questioning "why does everything on Twitter have to be effective or not effective?" Ex-NFL receiver and guest panelist Greg Jennings defended James' use of the platform, which sent Whitlock into a defense of hypothetical Trump supporters, arguing this time that James didn't blame Obama for protests in Ferguson and Baltimore.[77] Another guest panelist, Black ex-NBA player Jim Jackson, defended James' long record of speaking out on issues important to Black America, arguing that this history gave James the right to condemn Trump's role in the violence. Whitlock responded by equating Trump's history of racism with the Obama/Reverend Jeremiah Wright controversy during his election, in which Obama was forced to distance himself from Wright in the wake of the clergyman's comments termed anti-American and anti-white by conservative critics. This prompted Jennings to argue that Twitter was effective as evidenced by Trump's frequent usage of the platform. An incensed Whitlock exclaimed that Trump was "an idiot," and that "we're taking our cues from him" in America's frequent usage of Twitter, ultimately concluding that Twitter was "very effective in speaking to dumb people and short-sighted people."[78]

Whitlock's invective against James' comments, and against Twitter more generally, employs a chief strategy common with Trump defenders: "whataboutism," which Alan Dykstra defines as "an attempt to defend against criticism by turning a critique back at the accuser," and a strategy by which "an accusation of an offence is met with a counter-accusation, and the intent is to pivot away from the original criticism."[79] In creating false equivalencies between Trump's response to Charlottesville and Obama's responses to racial protests in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, Whitlock directs attention away from Trump's connections to and support from white

supremacist organizations present in Charlottesville and turns racism into an abstract concept affecting both Black and white people.

Whitlock also minimizes Trump's actions by calling him an "idiot" and instead focusing on the feelings and rationales of a hypothetical Trump supporter in the name of national and interracial unity. This action deflects further from Trump's complicity in the violence at Charlottesville and attempts to equalize Black-on-white racism with white-on-Black racism, a tactic common with various Fox News pundits like Bill O'Reilly and Tucker Carlson and one that ignores historical and contemporary power discrepancies and context. In critiquing Twitter, Whitlock also equated activists for social change like the #OccupyWallStreet and #BlackLivesMatter movements with Trump's performances of white male rage and racist and sexist rants against his opponents. This inaccurate comparison overlooked what Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman term Twitter's ability to reinforce messages from "…deeply embedded centers of power or those seeking the authority of such centers of power."[80] The show's debate over Twitter as a divisive engine, coupled with Whitlock's anti-liberal arguments, overlooked what Homero Gil de Zúñiga et. Al. observe as Twitter's efficacy in amplifying far-right populism while far-left movements have not found similar success on the platform.[81]

Additionally, Whitlock's performance in this debate segment, specifically his feuding with Jennings, represents a fissure between younger and older voices in the Black community. Marking this generational divide is an outlook in which the gains and tactics of the civil rights movement are frequently viewed as more positive and successful than contemporary efforts to close racial gaps. Furthermore, this wistful look back at the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s often does so by denigrating current Black culture, especially hip-hop and Black youth culture.[82] To critics of hip hop and younger Black activism like Whitlock, the nonviolent,

respectable image of activists from the 50s and 60s was sacrosanct, and contemporary realities of unequal economic opportunities did not justify any deviation from this messaging of the past. Todd Boyd interprets this conflict as a generational gap between older Black leaders who fought for access to the (white) mainstream and younger activists who chose to remain outside the same mainstream and accrue capital on different terms.[83]

In leveling these critiques of politically active Black athletes like James and their social media activity, then, Whitlock again personifies what Goldberg terms an "anti-racialist" outlook on contemporary racism by arguing that protesting against racism is, as he claimed, "ineffective and divisive."[84] Cowherd's role as a tepid defender of the commentary offered by James attempts to balance out Whitlock's firebrand conservatism. It also offers up the concept of Fox News' infamous slogan of being "fair and balanced" with its treatment of news stories. Parroting the successful *Hannity and Colmes* in terms of speaking time, style, political views, and on-air focus, Cowherd is more akin to Alan Colmes and Whitlock occupies the primary focus reserved for Sean Hannity.[85] Here, Cowherd's more superficially moderate viewpoints are meant to strengthen Whitlock's bombastic conservatism, thereby making Whitlock's arguments even more central to the identity of the program and, by proxy, the channel. Cowherd's primary role on the network is his radio/TV simulcast *The Herd with Colin Cowherd,* where he plays the role of the authoritative radio pundit crafting hot takes as he had for decades with ESPN. On *Speak for Yourself,* Cowherd still gives his opinions but also partly functions as a moderator between the comparatively more bombastic Whitlock and numerous guests who appear on the program. *SFY* sees Cowherd keeping operating as a "straight man" foil to support Whitlock's commentary, giving less of his signature commentary than one would hear on *The Herd.*

After several early segments in 2016 where James was held up as a positive example by Whitlock in comparison to Kaepernick, Whitlock later attacked LeBron James on numerous episodes of *SFY* in the wake of James's increased anti-Trump activity on his social media accounts and in interviews. A particularly notable example of Whitlock's criticism of James in the wake of James' complaints about racist graffiti being spray painted onto his Los Angeles home on May 31, 2017.[86] Specifically, on Cowherd's radio program *The Herd* prior to *SFY,* Whitlock blasted what he saw as James' exaggeration of the effects of this incident. Whitlock aggressively challenged James' assertion that "no matter how rich you are, no matter how famous you are, it's tough being Black in America," denouncing James' claim as "a lie" and arguing that "it's not tough being Oprah Winfrey…it's not tough being LeBron James…It's not tough being Jason Whitlock."[87]

Continuing this diatribe on *Speak for Yourself*, Whitlock argued that James's comparison of contemporary racism to the lynching of Emmett Till was "ridiculous," terming the graffiti "an inconvenience for LeBron" while arguing that James was "embracing his victimhood," adding his opinion that "this is not the racism that needs to be stamped out in America."[88] Cowherd then countered that the media typically chastise athletes for not getting involved in social issues while also noting the difficulty of speaking with no script in between NBA finals games. When presented with statistical evidence of ongoing racism in employment practices by guest panelist Chris Broussard, Whitlock argued that "people face unfairness in this world…the wealthy…regardless of color, have a far better chance of overcoming whatever unfairness happens to them than people who are not wealthy."[89] Essentially, Whitlock argued that the financial and professional success of James shielded him from any meaningful effects of racism, and that only poor Black people suffered from ongoing systemic discrimination, further

deemphasizing the harmful effects of racist language. Whitlock's commentary represents what Bonilla-Silva terms as "minimization of racism" through his insistence that rich Black people have largely transcended racism in comparison to previous generations, which supposedly rendered present racist rhetoric obsolete.[90] By mentioning James in the same category as Oprah Winfrey, Whitlock uses wealthy Black celebrities as proof that systemic racism was not a finite barrier to individual success. Through this framework, Whitlock also positions class as a more significant barrier than race to economic success in America, minimizing persistent racial inequality in American society.

Whitlock's refusal to examine the non-economic impacts of racism in contemporary American society paralleled numerous Fox News pundits such as Bill O'Reilly.[91] James' criticism of Donald Trump drew the ire of several conservative pundits, perhaps most notably Laura Ingraham of Fox News, who attacked James on her show, *The Ingraham Angle*. Ingraham labeled James' criticisms as "barely intelligible" and "ungrammatical." After asking, "must they run their mouths like that?" Ingraham decried the idea of "seek[ing] political advice from someone who gets paid $100 million a year to bounce a ball," and finally implored James and fellow NBA player—and Trump critic—Kevin Durant to "shut up and dribble!"[92]

Ingraham's disregarding of James and Durant's criticism of Trump dovetails with Whitlock's dismissal of James' and Kaepernick's political comments. This linkage between sports punditry and conservative political punditry not only occurs through a common viewpoint concerning the protests spanning the Newscorp/Fox connection, but also through their desire to have athletes "stay in their lane" concerning politics. Whitlock differs from contemporary Black conservatives appearing on Fox such as David Clarke, Candace Owens, and Katrina Pierson by

not explicitly supporting Trump or the Republican Party. In fact, Whitlock admitted in a 2018 interview with Roland S. Martin that he did not vote in the presidential election.[93]

This disconnect prevents Whitlock from following the path of Black conservatives like Clarence Thomas, Thomas Sowell, or Alan Keyes who trumpet participation in the Republican Party. Instead, Whitlock espouses a form of Black conservatism more in line with a traditional self-uplift ethos, independent of party politics, focusing accruing economic success and maintaining high moral standing as means of achieving tangible change. Whitlock's pattern of upholding conservative values while not voting Republican also represents an example of what Tasha S. Philpot identifies as a section of Black voters that professes conservative social beliefs without identifying with a conservative political party.[94] In eschewing political action through voting in favor of respectability politics, assimilationist rhetoric, and conservative messaging, Whitlock attempts to appeal to both Black and white audiences, casting himself as a free thinker unbound by traditional political labels.

On an August 29, 2018 episode of *SFY*, Whitlock lambasted James for making a "complete and utter fool of himself" on James' HBO program *The Shop.* Specifically, Whitlock decried *The Shop* as a "profane, primitive and privileged look…" at Black culture, referring to *The Shop* as "the Black billionaire barbershop." He chastised James and company for "cursing and dropping the N-word," and for allowing a "token white liberal (Jon Stewart) soaking it all in, feeling like the coolest person in the room because Black people are comfortable being ignorant in front of him."[95] Whitlock further lamented that "Twitter absolutely loved seeing LeBron this ratchet and ghetto," arguing that James' self-presentation on the program was very similar to Trump's penchant for self-aggrandizement and arrogance. Whitlock decried the lack of an "old head" in the Shop who could shut down any bad language from younger patrons, a further

allusion to Whitlock's self-styled conservatism and envisioned status as a Black elder. In a fashion akin to many critics of contemporary Black masculinity, Whitlock raged against Jon Stewart's comparison of James to Ali, stating boldly that "Ali stood on religious principles…LeBron James is standing on Twitter."[96]

Whereas Stephen A. Smith's infamous "stay off the weed" warnings to young Black athletes became an internet meme and solicited humorous reactions, Whitlock's verbal thrashing of James and *The Shop* personifies Elijah Anderson's description of the "old head" role in Black communities, that of "a [Black] man of stable means who believed in hard work, family life, and the church."[97] The concept of the "old head" adapted into a changing media landscape, with Whitlock now railing against the ills of Twitter rather than the supposed evils and morally deficient elements of rap music. Whitlock's televised persona functions similar to Bayless' invocation of the aging sportswriter/older sports fan on *First Take.* Here, Whitlock sharpens the focus of Bayless' general pessimism and repackages it as a critique of contemporary Black athletes and Black popular culture from a veteran of both communities. Additionally, in invoking Ali to minimize James, Whitlock further deradicalizes Ali's image and contributes to an ongoing retroactive conservative reclamation of figures who were derided by conservatives in their contemporary timeframe.[98]

Cowherd, in contrast to Whitlock, necessarily occupies a moderate and comparatively neutral role of the white outsider, effectively making him the "straight man" foil to Whitlock's impassioned "old head." This is particularly ironic given the combative and provocative nature of Cowherd's on-air persona on his radio program *The Herd,* in which he frequently projects auras of both authority and confrontation, antagonizing fan bases and athletes alike with charged rants and commentaries. Cowherd's comparatively tame persona on *SFY* eschews racial

confrontation in favor of promoting a NewsCorp-wide message of racial and social conservatism. In promoting Black conservatism and white moderation, *SFY* distances itself from its competitors on other channels like *First Take* and even from other FS1 shows like *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed,* both of which present Black pundits as being more politically liberal than their white counterparts. Through this role reversal, FS1 consistently reinforces sports punditry and sports more generally as a site of conservative value-making and classically liberal ideals of fairness, meritocracy, and colorblindness. In so doing, FS1 differentiated itself from ESPN by maintaining the NewsCorp brand of speaking to conservative "real Americans," translating the populist invective of Fox News pundits to sports fans allegedly alienated by an increase in political activity among athletes and sport media members.

Conclusions

Speak For Yourself proved to be a ratings success, as the program increased its average viewership from 2016 to 2017 by 53 percent.[99] After two years, Cowherd left *Speak for Yourself* but retained his radio program and television simulcast *The Herd with Colin Cowherd.* Cowherd was replaced in 2018 by former NFL player Marcellus Wiley, making *SFY* an all-Black and all-male debate desk, furthering the visual diversity hinted at with earlier shows like *Pardon the Interruption* and *First Take.* Whitlock eventually left *SFY* in 2020 to form a brief partnership with political and sports polemicist Clay Travis' *Outkick the Coverage* brand, taking aim at progressivism, Black Lives Matter, and contemporary sports media on the Internet rather than on a daily television program. He was summarily replaced on *SFY* by former NFL player (and

ESPN personality) Emmanuel Acho, maintaining the program's all-Black and all-male debate desk format.

Whereas *PTI* traded in on the friendship and general good feelings between panelists and *First Take* deliberately courted conflict between Smith and Bayless to represent broader racial tensions in American society, *SFY* frames these tensions outside the studio to liberal people Whitlock often chides as being "divisive" or insincere. Instead, *SFY* (and, by proxy, FS1) casts its pundits as defenders of sports and their capacity to uphold traditional conservative values. Whitlock's ability to find a long-term position on FS1, as well as his crossover appearances on Fox News and Fox Business shows, speaks to NewsCorp's brand identity of presenting visual on-air diversity while maintaining its conservative messaging across channels. In a manner similar to other conservative minority pundits such as Juan Williams and Dinesh D'Souza who appeared on Fox News programming, Whitlock is used by the network to both refute and minimize racism and racial conflict in sports media while also discrediting opposing liberal viewpoints that appear on the network.

Horowitz was ultimately fired from FS1 in the summer of 2017 after complaints of sexual harassment surfaced against him.[100] While Horowitz was removed from the network in the wake of this scandal, his vision of building programming blocks around punditry remained intact at FS1. As of 2020, *Undisputed, Speak for Yourself,* and *First Things First* all still anchor FS1's lineup. Horowitz eventually resurfaced two years later as an executive at a new sports streaming network called DAZN (pronounced "da zone") where he was reunited with former ESPN executive John Skipper. Nevertheless, Horowitz's termination from FS1 in a similar timeframe as the ouster of Fox News figures like Roger Ailes and Bill O'Reilly links sports media into the broader cultural current of the #MeToo movement and also represents the power of the growing

anti-harassment activism in the industry. However, his ability to resurface with Skipper at DAZN demonstrates the privileging of whiteness and masculinity across sports media. Additionally, the prominence of white men as both pundits and executives reinforces the gendered and sexist power structures governing NewsCorp and its properties, as these figures were only removed as a result of intense sponsorship and external media pressures.

SFY's rearticulation of political, racial, and gendered conservatism in sports media created spaces for combative, "outsider" figures like Clay Travis and his Outkick the Coverage brand to emerge within the Fox Sports umbrella. Travis had blogged independently for years about his love of SEC football, even briefly working for Deadspin. Travis, a white man who frequently describes himself as a "radical moderate" who worked on the Al Gore campaign and voted for Obama twice, regularly rails against what he sees as the ills of liberal ideology in both sports media and in American culture more broadly. Travis has occasionally guested on *SFY* and *The Herd* and has hosted Whitlock as a guest on his podcast and radio show. Fox Sports enthusiastically embraced Travis' rhetoric, giving him a national radio program (also titled *Outkick the Coverage*) that aired in the coveted morning drive time slot. In a similar manner to political outsiders like emergent conservative outlets Breitbart and The Blaze, Travis' persona represents white and male grievances, as his signature acronym, "DBAP," stands for "Don't be a pussy." He infamously proclaimed on CNN in 2017 that "The only things I believe in 100% are the first amendment and boobs." He also derided what he saw as left-leaning tendencies at ESPN, mockingly dubbing the network "MSESPN" and rebranding their flagship show *SportsCenter* as "WokeCenter."

Travis' anti-liberal backlash politics continue Whitlock's direct fusion of sports and conservatism, both in their constant appearances and interaction together, and through their joint

anti-liberal labor under the Fox brand. The emergence of Travis also represents an explicit white and male backlash to feminist gains in sports media. His surge in popularity, and association with Fox Sports, mirrors the Fox brand's conservatism more generally, as seen in the misogyny common on Fox News programs. Travis and his closeness with Whitlock and Cowherd represent what Banet-Weiser calls popular misogyny's "hostile rejoinder or challenge" to the rise of popular feminism in various cultural spheres.[101] While the challenges to feminism on programs like *Speak for Yourself* were less overt than Travis' misogynistic rhetoric, the lack of coverage of female athletes and symbolic erasure of women largely reinforced sport punditry as a male terrain at FS1 in a manner similar to ESPN.

Travis targeted players like Kaepernick and James, crafting a book titled *Republicans Buy Sneakers, Too: How the Left is Ruining Sports With Politics.*[102] Echoing the rhetoric of Whitlock, Travis continued to build his brand on white male grievance politics. He accomplished this by decrying politically active Black voices like James, Kaepernick, and Jemele Hill and mirroring Cowherd and Bayless's co-opting of white male victimhood, presenting their willingness to defend whiteness and question liberalism as virtuous calling cards. The explicit connection between the deliberately "un-PC" content of both blogs led *The Daily Beast* to dub Travis "the Alex Jones of Sports."[103] Travis also frequently does not exclusively talk about sports on these Periscopes, as he commonly discusses political or popular current events, citing his law degree and legal background in an effort to boost his credibility in political discussions on his show. In keeping with the practices of other male pundits, Travis seems drawn to controversy above all else. According to a 2017 *Politico* profile, Travis reportedly telling a friend of his desire to become "the Howard Stern of sports," insinuating a desire to cultivate a multi-

media persona trafficking in misogyny, racism, and shock humor in the name of capturing larger audience shares.[104]

Travis' rhetorical style, subject matter, and popularity reflect a synthesis of political pundits, talk radio hosts, and the confrontational tone of sports pundits like Bayless and Whitlock. This led him to expand his brand of reactionary polemics across various media all while denying any allegations of overt political bias, insisting his was a "radical moderate" voice which is meant to balance out what he sees as excessive liberalism in sports media. Travis himself claims he is filling of "an untapped void" of anti-"PC" content in the sport media market.[105] Travis utilizes outrage discourse in an attempt to satirize the excesses of what they see as outrage or victim culture from primarily left-wing voices, but in so doing, also represent whiteness and maleness as a sort of new "silent majority" in American sports media discourse. The success and attempted mainstreaming of fringe voices like Travis in sports media demonstrates clear industrial shifts from ESPN's failed partnership with Limbaugh in the introduction of this dissertation, as not only were these reactionary politics successful in the sports media industry through outside channels, but they were still seen as economically viable and legitimate by large sports media conglomerates like ESPN and FOX Sports.

Significantly, Travis entered into a partnership with Whitlock from June to December of 2020. During this time following his departure from *SFY*, Whitlock wrote columns extolling the values of conservative values and political position while positioning #Blacklivesmatter as a subversive force destroying contemporary American society, represents a further fusion of sport and political commentary. Travis and Whitlock both worked together to brand *Outkick* as a fearless media outlet in contrast to ESPN and other sports media outlets.

Chapter 5 continues to focus on FS1, interrogating the gender politics of how female sports pundits carve out a space in this overwhelmingly male industry. Specifically, the chapter links FS1's strategy of building its network around "incisive opinionists" to its female employees, most notably Katie Nolan, who had two separate programs at the network. Using Nolan as an example, I seek to explore how female pundits navigate hegemonic constructions of femininity in the industry and how they exert agency in challenging circumstances. Simultaneously, I use her career to delineate the limits of feminism in a hypermasculine industry, examining how and why women adopt the attitudes and styles of their male peers and/or create alternative modes of femininity.

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CHAPTER 5

"THEY'VE NEVER PLAYED THE GAME:" FEMALE PUNDITS, PATRIARCHY IN SPORTS MEDIA, AND KATIE NOLAN'S *GARBAGE TIME*

> I want to do something like what Jon Stewart does, for sports, something for college students to watch when they get home from the bars. They have shows like that in New Zealand and in England. But it's never worked here -- people take their sports too seriously. So we're stuck with ESPN reacting to the news in the same five ways, all day, morning till night.
>
> - Katie Nolan.[1]

Introduction

Sports media pundits are overwhelmingly white and male. This gendered and racial exclusion reflects industry-wide demographic breakdowns. Specifically, in 2018, approximately 82 percent of sports editor staffs for print and websites were male.[2] Turning to television, Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner, and Michela Musto surveyed local sports stations and ESPN and found that in 2014, 95% of anchors and co-anchors of sports news broadcasts were men, in addition to 85.6% of "ancillary" on-camera talent being men.[3] In keeping with the history of relegating women in sports broadcasts to roles such as sideline reporters, women on cable sports opinion shows are primarily confined to moderator or hostess roles, with some women like Linda Cohn, Suzy Kolber, and Robin Roberts breaking through to anchor ESPN's flagship news program *SportsCenter*.

Setting aside occasional panelist appearances by women like Jackie MacMullan, Kate Fagan, or Jemele Hill on ESPN shows like *The Sports Reporters, Around the Horn,* and *First Take*, women were largely present on these programs as peacekeepers and presenters on topics. Even accomplished female sports journalists like Dana Jacobson and Cari Champion were confined to the center seat of *First Take*, never presented as what Nimmo and Combs term "keepers of special knowledge" or active and qualified debaters/pundits.[4] That women on ESPN

and FS1 were not given permanent roles on pundit shows until the 2010s confirms ingrained biases in the industry assuming that men had more innate and salable sports knowledge.[5] Adding to this gendered difference in sports media, networks typically keep shows featuring female pundits out of prime viewing slots and channels, further symbolizing the secondary status of these women in relation to their male colleagues. Beginning in the late 2000s and early 2010s, women such as Katie Nolan, Jemele Hill, Mina Kimes, Sarah Spain, and Michelle Beadle achieved levels of prominence eclipsing the stereotypical sideline reporter or occasional studio host seen on sport television. These women served in capacities ranging from commentators to solo hosts to columnists. In contrast to channels like Fox News and MSNBC targeting specific segments of the viewing populace as their primary audience base, I contend that ESPN and FS1 added women as pundits to expand an overarching programming strategy of capturing the widest possible audience of sports fans under their existing brand identity.

This chapter analyzes how female pundits on sports television carve out spaces and push back against expectations of femininity in the industry. I conduct close readings of two programs starring Katie Nolan at FS1: *No Filter with Katie Nolan* (2014-15) and *Garbage Time with Katie Nolan* (2015-2017), to extend the analysis of FS1's cultural and industrial politics from Chapter 4. I contend that Nolan's tenure at FS1 represents the terms and limitations of success for female pundits on sports television. In particular, *Garbage Time* contributes to a hegemonically constructed image of femininity in keeping with cultural currents of the mid- and late 2010s. By airing and promoting *Garbage Time*, FS1 cast a post-feminist vision by heralding Nolan as a peer to other male sports pundits, a rarity in this often hypermasculine space. Nolan's tenure overlaps with the Bayless/Smith *First Take* era (2012-16), and also amidst the Jamie Horowitz-driven rebranding of FS1 as an opinion-driven channel discussed in Chapter 4.

I therefore argue that Nolan represents a new type of female figure in sports media, the "cool sports girl," a woman who possesses significant sports knowledge while also appealing to (often white) hegemonic ideals of beauty and heterosexuality. Leaving behind the role of the sideline reporter or show hostess, the "cool sports girl" routinely spars with male counterparts and takes on several masculine characteristics of pundits while also reaffirming her heterosexuality. The "cool sports girl" obtains a sort of honorary masculinity and cross-gender identification with male viewers, as if they are just "one of the guys" watching sports and talking about the games. Other "cool sports girls" on sports television include Fox's Charissa Thompson, ESPN's Michelle Beadle, Sarah Spain, and Cari Champion, Barstool's Kayce Smith, and the NFL Network's Kay Adams. While some counterhegemonic potential exists in this figure, there are also limits to the agency "cool sports girls" can exhibit, as they are often promoted less than their male peers and rarely host their own shows. When these women do express overtly feminist opinions, they frequently face misogynistic retaliation from male viewers, demonstrating the finite boundaries of the gains these "cool sports girls" have achieved toward gaining acceptance from male viewers.

In entering sports media through a male-focused site like Guyism and finding early success partly through attacking other women, Nolan also demonstrates sports media's cooperation with what Susan J. Douglas terms "enlightened sexism." According to Douglas, enlightened sexism is accomplished via popular media constructing "fantasies of power," in which "they assure girls and women, repeatedly, that women's liberation is a fait accompli and that we are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than we actually are."[6] Douglas explains that enlightened sexism "takes the gains of the women's movements as a given, and then uses them as permission to resurrect retrograde images

of girls and women as sex objects…still defined by their appearance and their biological destiny."[7] I argue that the slight increase of women in front of cameras on sports television did little to remove entrenched sexism in sports television. The simultaneous praise and misogynistic opposition experienced by women for speaking out against gender inequality illustrates a gendered divide concerning the notion of a "post-feminist" America, a term defined by Angela McRobbie as "a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined."[8]

A Brief History of Sexism in Sports Media from Newspapers to the 'Net

A significant body of scholarly literature documents and analyzes sport's history of gendered exclusion and segregation. This type of sexist opposition to women in sports media was eventually challenged through legal actions such as sexual discrimination lawsuits and injunctions from professional leagues granting access for women to spaces such as locker rooms.[9] Mariah Burton Nelson summarizes this history by writing that, to many male spectators and fans, "sports offer a pre-civil rights world where white men, as owners, coaches, and umpires still rule." Nelson also claims that the "sports arena" provides a place where "a man can express racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes not tolerated in many other parts of society."[10] These gendered disparities exist in sports media as well. Given that it is an industry comprised mostly of white men, sports media replicates a white male gaze through its focus on male sports and its simultaneous sexualization and infantilization of female athletes and media members.

In comparison to their male peers, Female sports pundits also receive significantly more backlash and harassment via Twitter and other social media platforms, reinforcing the idea of

sport being an aggressively policed male arena. This sexist opposition signals the limits of women's progress in sports television, operating in a manner similar to racially motivated pushback against minority gains in the post-civil rights era. Currently, these sentiments are spearheaded in sports media by the rise of overtly white and male sports media reactionaries such as Barstool Sports and Outkick the Coverage. Attacks against female pundits questioning the male establishment represented by these sites range from questioning their credibility and sports knowledge to objectification, doxing, and outright sexual harassment via social media. This virulent opposition to women in sports punditry embodies Sarah Banet-Weiser's argument of popular misogyny rising to meet popular feminism, with male backlash ranging from questioning women's sports knowledge due to their lack of playing experience to outright sexism and harassment.[11]

Female sports pundits often call attention to issues of gender inequality even while they primarily focus their commentary on male sports. A common criticism of female sports pundits by male critics is that they are not as knowledgeable about sports as their male counterparts due to their lack of experience playing the all-male sports they cover. This sexist perspective not only discredits female pundits, but also upholds the concept of professional sports and, to a lesser extent, sports media as paragons of masculinity. Indeed, Pamela J. Creedon contends that sport "is a microcosm of gender values in American culture."[12] Therefore, just as sport as an institution reinforces American values concerning gender and sexism, sports media reflects many of those same values.

Trivialization of women in sports media has a long history. Historically, women have been relegated to supporting roles such as sideline reporters. Michael Mudrick, Laura Burton, and Carolyn A. Lin write that limiting women in sports media to these duties rather than giving

them opportunities as featured pundits or experts on popular sports programs works to "reinforce a gender-role stereotype of women knowing less about sports, as they are not provided credible roles to discuss sport within the industry."[13] Consigning women to these supporting roles in which they often are forced to ask trivial questions and interact with coaches and athletes at inopportune times like halftime, TV timeouts, or postgame interviews again reinforces a popular conception of these women being less credible than their male peers. Female reporters were often prevented from gaining insider access to male athletes in homosocial spaces such as locker rooms, leading to important legal breakthroughs like Lisa Olson's lawsuit against the New England Patriots after she reported being harassed in the locker room by players.[14] Angela Pratt et. al. write that "females in sport carry a burden that does not exist for their male counterparts: the need to continuously demonstrate their credibility and worth, especially when they work with men's sports."[15] This concept of women in the industry performing unseen labor to demonstrate their sports knowledge and credentials mirrors the struggles of underrepresented ethnic and gender groups across the American labor force, working "twice as hard to get half as far" as colleagues in dominant social groups.[16]

Janet S. Fink contends that "overt sexism in sport is still quite common and often uncontested," arguing further that "sexism in sport has more of a *Mad Men* feel."[17] Fink also analyzes the intersectional politics of sports and sports media, claiming that sports are a space where "overt sexist acts are ignored, giggled about, or accepted when similar racist, homophobic, or any other type of discriminatory acts are typically condemned."[18] By keeping pundits, commentators, and investigative journalists largely male, sports television supported this gendered monopoly of opportunity. This extended to the television industry more broadly, where power remained concentrated in the hands of men. As an example, Martha M. Lauzen observes

that across the entire television industry in the 2018-19 season, women only held 31% of "key behind-the-scenes positions" on television programs.[19] In a manner similar to sports organizations and their executive/governing positions, sports television maintains a white male center of power even as it employs women and people of color at various highly visible positions, effectively limiting the diversity of perspectives from any on-camera or writing talent.

Supporting this framework, Kenneth Merrill et. al. note that there is a "suggestion" in sports media "that women who become sportscasters must meet a superficial criterion: they must be physically attractive and pleasing to male viewers."[20] They also contend that "sports media protect their financial interests by reinforcing socialized structures such as masculinity, objectification, and the male gaze."[21] This focus on female sportscasters' physical appearance over the substance of their commentaries or reporting again advances this notion of women in the industry being taken less seriously than their male peers. Studies from Laurence Etling and Raymond Young support this conclusion, as they demonstrate that both male and female audiences assume that male sportscasters are more credible than female sportscasters.[22] Similar to the colorblind racism discussed in previous chapters, women in televised sports face criticisms that abandoned the explicit biological sexism of previous decades, but rather focused on supposedly gender-neutral characteristics, with male fans' frequent criticisms of female commentators' voices as "shrill" or "grating" being a prime example.[23]

Even with sports media largely under the control of white men, a new generation of female athletes and broadcasters reflects a marked increase in women participating in sports. This was illustrated by women comprising 40% of active American athletes in 2013, two generations after the landmark Title IX legislation of 1972.[24] In 2015, the same year *Garbage Time* debuted on FS1, the FIFA Women's World Cup broke viewership records, with nearly 23

million viewers tuning into FOX to watch the final match.[25] These shifts in athletic participation and viewership demonstrate a growing interest in women's sports, despite the fact that media and television coverage lagged behind this curve. In addition to coverage of women's sports like the World Cup and the WNBA's relationship with ESPN, the record viewership of the Women's World Cup suggested that popular culture held space for women as professional athletes and women's sports as part of the sports media industry.

No Filter: Katie Nolan, FS1, and Fighting for "A Seat at the Big Boy Table"

To properly analyze Katie Nolan's FS1 programs *No Filter* and *Garbage Time,* it is essential to understand and contextualize the show's reliance on the Internet and online distribution. As briefly discussed in previous chapters, the encroachment of cable sports networks onto the Internet and social media was originally intended to facilitate horizontal integration of their channels' brands onto this new media form. Male pundit shows like *Pardon the Interruption, First Take,* and *Speak for Yourself* were broadcast live over cable as well as in segments on the Internet through YouTube, Twitter, and ESPN and Fox Sports websites. With the rise of social media, cutting these shows' content into four- or five-minute debates appealed to audience members accustomed to the brief length and viral nature of web-based content. More importantly, social media encouraged posts featuring these segments to go viral, as people who couldn't or wouldn't watch a debate program live on air for its entire duration could still interact with these programs and their host pundits.

In contrast to the other pundits profiled in this dissertation who possessed backgrounds in either print journalism, television, or radio, Nolan entered the industry primarily through

blogging and homemade videos for fringe sites like Guyism, a site that proclaims its goal is to "bring men the news, information, and entertainment they want on a daily basis."[26] Nolan's early success hearkened back to sports talk radio host Nanci Donnellan, the self-proclaimed "fabulous sports babe," in part due to their ability to adopt the aggressive, confrontational personas of many of their male peers. One of Nolan's initial blogs was titled "Bitches Can't Hang," which Nolan later disavowed. In 2018, she lamented that:

> I was the girl in high school who was like, 'I don't have girlfriends. I only like guys.' Now I'm like, you were just buying into this idea of what a woman is that *they* defined, and then you perpetuated it by being like, *I'm not like them*. Well, yeah, you are like them, 'cause you're a woman. So if you're a cool woman, that means women can be cool, unlike what is constantly told to us. So instead of aligning with men against women, you should align with women against men and be like, *Not all women like pink and are into reality shows*. And I chose the wrong side, and I still am like upset about that. And I'm most upset because it got me a job that I deserve either way, but I got by being mean about women. It sucks.[27]

Nolan's recollection reveals several double standards about how female and male sports fans are socialized by the industry. Nolan's admission that she felt pressured to buy into "this idea of what…*they* defined" femininity to be represents the gendered politics of the sport/media complex. Her comments reflect the male dominance of the medium, as the type of women who would appeal to male readers and viewers was undoubtedly defined into categories by male executives. The idea of sports television as a masculine, heteronormative, space extended to the Internet, whose various subcultures including meme humor worked to, according to Jessica Drackett et. Al., "mobilise these discourses in a new medium in order for heteronormative, masculinised identities to claim rightful ownership of this medium and the spaces in which it presents itself."[28] This presented a paradox for female sport pundits; they were at once expected to embody femininity and heteronormative ideals of sex appeal while simultaneously proving they could be "one of the boys" and demonstrate sufficient sports knowledge to male viewers.

Nolan's success through mocking hegemonic femininity and simultaneously demonstrating sports knowledge positions her as a "cool sports girl."

Concurring with this viewpoint, Jamie Skerski argues that social systems like sports media "may incorporate the challenge of female participation by including women…without having to significantly alter the underlying masculine structure and value systems."[29] In a manner similar to Bonilla-Silva's explanation of how certain successful minorities are used by conservatives to uphold the concept of a colorblind and postracial America, the slight increase in women on sport television across various roles allowed for sport media to cast a vision of an industry free of sexism, despite ongoing issues of gender inequality behind the camera and with on-air talent.[30] Beginning with 2014's *No Filter*, however, Nolan harnessed and utilized her agency to push back against this latent sexism in sports television, targeting both implicit and explicit discrimination against female pundits by their male peers.

Nolan's first solo venture with Fox Sports was a web-based series called *No Filter with Katie Nolan.* Fox Sports promoted *No Filter* as a program "which presents topical sports stories with a megabyte of wit, a dash of sarcasm and sharp dose of comedy."[31] This alternative approach connects with earlier efforts from rival channels like ESPN to provide "infotainment" to viewers to supplement traditional newscasts and live sports while also venturing into other markets of viewers. In forging a path against the traditional grain of televised sports punditry (comedy mixed with commentary), Nolan's career at FS1 symbolizes a broader struggle for female representation and avoiding the metaphorical fringes in the industry. For example, while pundits on FS1 like Skip Bayless and Colin Cowherd occasionally appear in self-deprecating ads promoting their shows or the network, they never engage in full-on comedy sketches as regular features of their shows like Nolan. Her initial relegation to a web-based program also illustrated

the lesser financial commitment and fringe positioning FS1 gave to her as opposed to male pundits like Colin Cowherd, whose radio program *The Herd with Colin Cowherd,* was simulcast on FS1 and Fox radio stations. In taking Nolan less seriously than her male peers in the industry, FS1 continued the conservatism of sports television which normalizes men as authoritative voices in sports punditry.

Nolan gained widespread recognition on *No Filter* for a segment addressing the NFL's handling of Baltimore Ravens player Ray Rice's assault of his then-fiancée Janae Palmer. Nolan aimed her comments at an implied male audience, speaking as a woman who loves football "as much as you, if not more." She then presented her credentials as a fan and fantasy football player. Nolan then approached the crux of her monologue: "how do I reconcile my values and beliefs with my love for a sport that has an ongoing issue with domestic violence?"[32] She argued that a boycott of the NFL over their botched handling of Rice's punishment was unrealistic, arguing that boycotting the NFL would help the NCAA, which has its own ethical issues and, perhaps more importantly, "would just remove the critical thinkers from the NFL conversation and leave the league to continue making billions of dollars with even less accountability…A boycott means walking away…I would rather fight back."[33]

Nolan recounted how she had an opportunity to question NFL commissioner Roger Goodell on his rationale for the punishment and its impact on female fans. However, she ultimately did not out of fear for her job, and also because she claimed it was not her role, adding that she makes "sort-of funny videos for the Internet that are watched by a handful of people…I played the role that had been assigned to me."[34] Nolan expounded on these role expectations for women on sports television, claiming that "women in sport television are allowed to read headlines, patrol sidelines, and generally facilitate conversations for their male colleagues." She

pushed further, observing that "while the Stephen A. Smiths, Mike Francesas, Dan Patricks, and Keith Olbermanns of the world get to weigh in on the issues of the day, we just smile and throw to commercial." She then preemptively answered critics who, Nolan speculated, would say of women, "well, they've never played the game, so they just aren't qualified to speak about it." Nolan countered by pointing out the irony that "topics like domestic violence and racism and corruption," are left by ESPN for "Boomer (Chris Berman) [to] handle those between downs." She then demanded: "it's time for the conversation to change, or at least those participating in the conversation…it's time for women to have a seat at the big boy table." She turned her attention then to sport media, "the truth is, the NFL will never respect women and their opinions as long as the media it answers to doesn't."[35]

Nolan's commentary expounds on several important issues in sports media during the 2010s. First, Nolan highlights the lack of female pundits by referencing several male pundits who are given carte blanche to sound off on any issues in sports, regardless of their individual qualifications or backgrounds. These male pundits have accrued a certain amount of prestige and cultural capital among sport television audiences, explaining this seemingly limitless latitude with the networks and their audience members. Second, all major sports media outlets, including ESPN, Fox, NBC, and CBS, had relationships with the NFL in which they paid billions of dollars for broadcast rights. This financial conflict of interest often prohibited overtly critical commentary from pundits at these networks. Challengers to this policy of positive NFL coverage were often met with strict opposition from networks like ESPN, where a 2013 documentary called *League Of Denial,* which was critical of the NFL's handling of concussions, had its support from ESPN pulled and eventually aired on PBS. This act of censorship greatly reduced the documentary's initial audience and raised questions about ESPN's editorial practices.[36]

This aversion to anti-NFL rhetoric by networks makes Nolan's words, and subsequent increase in visibility with FS1, more significant within the sports media industry. Here, Fox Sports, a financial partner with the league, did not discipline a critic of the NFL. Instead, they actively promoted Nolan for her critiques. To this end, Fox Sports put out a statement referencing Nolan's commentary, promoting her clip while also stating: "We hear you, Katie. You've got a seat at our big table here."[37] This statement from Fox Sports not only endorsed Nolan and her structural feminist critiques of the industry, but their eventual promotion of Nolan to the television airwaves with *Garbage Time* indicated that they saw potential profitability in catering to female talent and, potentially, female viewers. Fox decided not to criticize or punish Nolan occurred even though they regularly air more NFL games per year than ESPN, who suspended Simmons for expressing similar views. In refraining from punishing Nolan for criticizing one of their biggest financial partners, FS1 positioned itself as the anti-ESPN, supporting its pundits in the face of criticism and controversy while also nominally taking a feminist position in pursuit of economic gains. This dichotomy works in a similar manner to fellow Newscorp property Fox News' promotion and defense of its pundits and network personalities from external critics.[38]

Third, Nolan's commentary spoke for and to an underserved population of female NFL fans, who are often overlooked by advertisers and NFL programs. Thomas P. Oates writes that in American culture, football "could be celebrated (or derided) as a last bastion against the encroachments of women's liberation."[39] Hoping to add in women as consumers, the NFL made superficial efforts to reach out to female fans. These marketing efforts included launching lines of female apparel ranging from form-fitting team jerseys to other clothing articles and even team-themed household items. Victoria E. Johnson argues that the NFL's various gestures such

as the "NFL for Her" campaign are part of the league's broader goal of ensuring that "no fan is intentionally turned away by a particular appeal."[40] These appeals to female viewers reinforce traditional conservative notions of gender roles, and, in their refusal to upset heteronormative patriarchal concepts of gender roles, assign women a role as consumers and fans, but never as active participants. These efforts by the NFL to include female fans mirror what Jennifer McClearen identifies as the Ultimate Fighting Championship's (UFC) ability to use difference to "facilitat[e] feelings of belonging and identification" with the sport and its participants.[41] While the NFL does not employ women as players like the UFC employs female fighters, its message of wanting women to participate as supportive, product-consuming fans marked a differentiation from their efforts to advertise to male fans. In marketing to women through the deployment of traditional gender norms and roles, the NFL practiced a form of what Douglas terms "enlightened sexism," where the NFL promoted women in superficial positions like wives and girlfriends of players and fans, limiting the counterhegemonic potential of female intrusion into a male space while still ostensibly giving them a seat at the "big boy table."[42]

By directly challenging these broader hegemonic constructions of masculinity put on NFL fans, Nolan's commentary carried ramifications into the maintenance of football as a sexist space whose gendered boundaries were constructed and upheld by sports media. Nolan's appeal to her credentials as a fan and as a fantasy football player represents the constant self-proving required by female football fans to gain acceptance from male fans. Nickolas W. Davis and Margaret Carlisle Duncan demonstrate that fantasy football is popularly marked as a male space that reconstructs hegemonic masculinity. They note that male fantasy football players would "find it unusual if a woman beat [them] in" fantasy football, which they "feel is a man's role in society."[43] They also argue that typical female participation in these leagues occurs in a

supporting capacity as wives or girlfriends, and that "competition with women who were serious about fantasy sport leagues would create uneasiness" for men, "challenging the male's masculinity and supremacy in sport."[44] Nolan's ability to excel in these arenas pushed back the hegemonic masculinity of these spaces and, thereby, her gendered qualification to comment on Rice and the NFL. Her success in this traditionally male terrain bolstered her "cool sports girl" status, as her fantasy football prowess indicated that she possessed knowledge of the NFL beyond her hometown New England Patriots. It also positions Nolan as a rebellious voice against gender inequality still firmly entrenched in the patriarchal systems of sports fandom and sports media, evidenced by her enduring fandom of the NFL and her employment with one of its biggest financial partners in Fox Sports despite its obvious sexism.

Immediate reaction to Nolan's commentary was largely positive. The YouTube clip has (as of 2020) nearly half a million views. The *Sport Business Journal* hailed Nolan as one of several important female voices that has "shaped this debate," writing that they "couldn't recall a sports business story that has positioned the strong opinions and pointed commentary from female journalists so prominently," adding: "it's good to see."[45] *The New York Times* heralded Nolan's commentary as part of a "proliferation of female voices covering this [the Ray Rice assault] story," something they praised as "a testament to the progress women have made in a profession that was once a male bastion."[46] *USA Today's* internet site *For The Win* praised Nolan for giving "a defense of loving a sport without loving the people who run it," while also providing "a commentary on the role of women in sports media."[47] Outside of sports media, *The Huffington Post* simply labeled the commentary a "touchdown."[48]

Nolan's calling out of both overt and structural sexism in the NFL and its media partners stood in stark contrast to the controversy involving popular pundit Stephen A. Smith's take on

Rice, delivered on ESPN's *First Take.* Smith insinuated that women should not "provoke" any wrong actions from their abusers. Smith's subsequent suspension and admonishment from ESPN in part arose from the complaints of female ESPN employees like Michelle Beadle, who objected vociferously to the notion that women's actions were somehow to blame for domestic violence. Specifically, Beadle mocked Smith's assertions by sarcastically tweeting that, due to Smith's commentary, she's "now aware that [she] can provoke [her] own beating."[49] While Nolan's platform at FS1 wasn't as big as Beadle's ESPN audience in terms of viewers reached, the agency exhibited by both women proved to be effective in changing the conversation about domestic violence within sports media. This movement against patriarchy in sports television spanned networks and personalities, providing incentives for both ESPN and FS1 to promote progressive female pundits across their programming.

Nolan's insistence on structural change in sports television brings to mind bell hooks' concept of the "oppositional gaze," in which subjugated populations declare: "not only will I stare…I want my look to change reality."[50] hooks' usage of the term referred to Black female spectators of film who recognized their underrepresentation and mischaracterization in the medium, which subsequently informed their critical analysis of films. In insisting on women having "a seat at the big boy table" of sports media, Nolan encouraged women to become critical observers of a sport she covered and professed to be a fan of, taking to task the gaze-makers of sports media. This reference to a metaphorical "big boy table" within sports television also referred to the insidious infantilization of female athletes by sports commentators. As evidence of this trend, Michael A. Messner, Margaret Carlisle Duncan, and Kerry Jensen note that "verbal descriptions of athletes tend to gender mark women, not men," and that female athletes are "constantly referred to as 'girls'…'young ladies'…and 'women'" while their male counterparts

are "never referred to as 'boys.'"[51] This gender marking of female athletes worked to reconstruct hegemonic masculinity present in American popular culture into sports media as well. It also contributed to a trend of taking women in sports and sports media less seriously than men in the industry, much less accepting them as authoritative pundits.[52] By drawing attention to the dearth of female commentators in the NFL television community (as well as in sports media more generally), Nolan's recognition of the ingrained sexism of sports and sports media challenged prevailing biases among both commentators and fans.

While Nolan received praise for her criticism of the NFL and its media partners, she was also met with male detractors. Resentment toward female presence in sports conversations reflects what Sarah Banet-Weiser terms an ongoing struggle between popular feminism and popular misogyny.[53] Banet-Weiser explains these oppositional concepts as dueling forces of sorts, detailing that when feminism becomes popular, forces of misogyny reemerge to counteract this feminist activism. An example of this popular misogyny targeted at Nolan came from the founder of Barstool Sports, Dave Portnoy. Portnoy dismissed Nolan's criticisms as a rant about gender inequity in the sports media industry, claiming: "as a guy, 95% of the time I'd rather listen to guys talk about sports and call games."[54] Portnoy subsequently identified female pundits like Jackie MacMullan, Doris Burke, and Suzy Kolber as women who "can all go toe to toe with anybody" and placed Nolan in this category. However, he ultimately concluded that "women complaining that you need more women in sports always ignores the fact that men make up 90% of the audience and men prefer listening to men," adding that "it would be no different than men complaining they want somebody on *The View* to talk about girly things."[55]

This type of male resistance against women in sports media dovetails with the white male resentment of talk radio hosts and sports pundits channeling racial animosity against Black

athletes. Portnoy's dismissal of Nolan's comments embodies the Barstool brand's motto "Saturdays are for the boys," reinforcing the concept of sports as a male preserve. And while Nolan's early career beginnings with Guyism and background as a superfan of Boston teams overlaps with the rhetorical and geographical terrain of Barstool Sports, her challenging of entrenched sexism overrode these common bonds with her male detractors. Resistance like this to Nolan's arguments for greater inclusion for women in online sports spaces represent what Banet-Weiser and Miltner term "…a response to the incursion of women and people of color into what were previously almost exclusively white, male spaces."[56] Indeed, Nolan was the frequent target of sexist and misogynist opposition in the comments of her YouTube uploads of *No Filter*. Nolan even acknowledged these comments in a video where she read the vilest comments and sarcastically heaped praise on the offending parties.[57] While the video attempted to find humor in the ridiculousness of these replies, it also represented the acknowledgement of a darker element of sports media consumption on the internet, using humor as a coping mechanism to highlight this sexist opposition to women in the industry.

From the 'Net to the Network: *Garbage Time* and Mixing Comedy with Punditry

Less than a year later, Nolan received a new assignment with FS1, moving to a regular slot on the channel's cable lineup. Beginning in March of 2015, FS1 officially launched *Garbage Time with Katie Nolan.* FS1 touted *Garbage Time* as a space "to tackle the biggest sports stories of the week, presented by Katie as only she can with her biting wit and fearless opinions."[58] While FS1's description of Nolan's punditry as "fearless" aligns with expectations of male pundits like Skip Bayless and Stephen A. Smith, the network also emphasized the show's

commitment to "off-the-wall guest interviews and comedy bits."[59] The standard formula for *Garbage Time* saw Nolan delivering comedic monologues about sports news, then conducting interviews with athletes or other media members on mock stadium seats with red solo cups, along with various pre-recorded segments ranging from games to sketches relating to sports topics. *Garbage Time* amplified the self-deprecation of ESPN's *Pardon the Interruption* while also containing similar elements of self-awareness. These similarities ranged from both programs' pundits drawing scant laughs or reactions from hidden crew members to Nolan's frequent interactions with producers or other off-camera personnel. Additionally, the name *Garbage Time* references a slang term for the meaningless moments at the end of a game when the outcome has been decided. This reference uses the term to symbolize the undesirable assignments often given to female sports reporters and pundits, who are often relegated to a metaphorical sort of "garbage time" in sports media. However, the program deploys the term ironically to suggest a low-stakes, fun atmosphere different from the other programs profiled in this dissertation, who presented their debates as matters of life or death.

This deliberate mix of formality and humorous presentations stretched the program in several directions. *Garbage Time* targeted young, Internet-based viewers through short segments, female viewers in its featuring of a woman's voice as a sports fan/pundit, and fans of comedy or variety programming, as *Garbage Time* not only referenced popular culture, but also frequently featured offbeat interviews and sketches by Nolan and guests. Nolan commented on the show's bending of genres in an interview with *Sports Illustrated*, explaining that she was "cautious about saying my TV show is a breakthrough because that is not the purpose of it…" adding that she didn't "want it to be heralded as a show for women, by a woman."[60] She added that she had "a lot of things I have to break through and not even the role of a women (sic) traditionally in

sports media but also historically, sports and comedy do not do so well." Through comments like these, Nolan positions herself as a comedian before a traditional sports pundit or even a feminist. Nolan's denial of explicitly feminist goals for *Garbage Time* demonstrates the challenges facing women in the industry, and women in media more generally. Through focusing on the show's comic potential rather than the novelty of a program starring one woman talking sports, Nolan and FS1 embodied the concept of "serious" sports talk as a male preserve.

The addition of *Garbage Time* to FS1 illustrated a broader programming strategy for the network. Horowitz elaborated on this strategy in an interview with *The New York Times*, explaining that "We're making big bets on three types of programming: live events, pre- and postgame programming and opinion-based programming," while countering that "we're making an equally big bet against traditional news and information shows."[61] This bet against news programming was also seen through the network's cancellation of its own *SportsCenter*-style news and highlight show *Fox Sports Live.* Including Nolan in this group of "opinion-based programming" signaled an expansion of the network's commitment to pundits, as well as a departure from the standard sports pundit "shout show." By featuring Nolan as a pundit on the network, FS1 symbolically made her "one of the guys" whose opinions were worthy of her own sports talk show. While Horowitz had attempted similar types of programming at ESPN with shows like *SportsNation* and *Olbermann,* making this genre the bedrock of FS1's brand indicated the power of punditry and opinion shows in the 2010s across sports television. *The Atlantic* praised *Garbage Time's* connection to other comedic news commentary shows like E!'s *The Soup* (2004-2015, 2020-) and Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* (1996-), in a manner similar to *The Sports Reporters* emulating *The McLaughlin Group* decades earlier.[62] Garbage Time also premiered a year after HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (2014-), a program featuring a

former *Daily Show* correspondent satirizing contemporary news with one feature story during its 30 minute run time, mixing informative reporting, investigative journalism, and commentary.

In moving Nolan from FoxSports.com to FS1, Fox Sports upheld two important industrial practices. First, in giving Nolan a show, albeit in a relatively unpopular time slot, FS1 extended its strategy of promoting punditry beyond the male demographics traditionally sought by cable sports television. Second, it reasserted the primacy of television even as traditional TV viewership was in decline. Speaking to this reality, Fox Sports executive Jamie Horowitz told the *Sports Business Journal* in 2015 that personalities at his networks who "have popular podcasts and social media profiles" still set appearing on TV as "the aspiration" for their careers.[63] Bringing Nolan's web-centric appeal to television relied on keeping show segments divided into spreadable YouTube-length clips, thereby catering to the changing demands of a younger, more tech-savvy audience. In marketing *Garbage Time* across both TV and the Internet, FS1 acknowledged the Internet's importance to maintaining a TV network's relevancy to viewers.

Garbage Time hearkens back to the concept of "infotainment," where programs like ABC's *Speaking of Sports with Howard Cosell* and ESPN2's *SportsNight* relied on comedic gags and pop culture references to supplement sports news and commentary. Nolan's talent for bringing in pop culture references and delivering news as part of a comedic monologue appealed to the "cool sports girl" archetype. She embodied this archetype by her drinking out of red solo cups in stadium seats with guests during her one-on-one interviews, suggesting that unlike most anchors or pundits, Nolan was just as comfortable at the ballpark or at a party as she was behind the news desk. Nolan's monologues on sports, ability to talk to athletes and journalists, and self-aware jokes about her drinking and sexual prowess defied hegemonic notions of femininity, making her stand out from other women on sports television who were given much less latitude

to express their opinions on air. In a manner similar to Fox's branding of genre-shattering and promotion of "edgy" shows on Fox and FX, *Garbage Time* represents FS1's attempt to disrupt expectations of women in the industry, mixing comedy with commentary in a scripted format. However, by emphasizing more hegemonically constructed masculine traits like cracking jokes, using explicit language, and drinking on-air, Nolan's persona defies gender boundaries in efforts to appeal to both male and female viewers.

Garbage Time highlighted Nolan's sexuality in a manner very different from the typically older male pundits at the networks. For example, the show featured a segment called "Game of Moans," spoofing the title of the mega-popular HBO series *Game of Thrones.* This segment involved Nolan and/or a guest attempting to decipher if the audible moans played on air were from a female tennis match or from a sex scene.[64] Another example of *Garbage Time's* reliance on her overt sex appeal occurred in a 2016 spoof of Beyonce's *Lemonade* video, in which Nolan dressed in a similar manner to the pop star while imagining Tom Brady as a cheating partner due to his purported involvement in the "deflategate" scandal.[65] This type of humor never occurred on *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* or *Speak For Yourself,* demonstrating the expected sexualization that women in sports media face in comparison to their male peers.

Nolan's seeming nonchalance and comfortability talking about sex also played into the "cool sports girl" image, as she moved from discussing sports statistics to televised sex scenes in a seamless manner. She also expressed reluctance to *The Guardian* in a 2016 interview about the fact that she had "hair, makeup, and wardrobe people" from Fox who distanced her from her goal of "stay[ing] in her uniform of sneakers, jeans, t-shirt and her glasses."[66] Nolan claimed that she was "aware of how [she] look[s] being a storyline," but she preferred to be known for "say[ing] what she means," which, *The Guardian* argued, gave her more credibility with "her mostly male

viewing audience."[67] Nolan's attire ranged from more formal blouse and pant combos to dresses to t-shirts and jeans, eschewing the uniformity of male pundits' suits and ties on their shows. In giving Nolan a platform on cable television while simultaneously de-emphasizing the seriousness of her opinions, FS1 empowered Nolan as an individual pundit while reifying gendered stereotypes in the industry and catering to male viewers. Nolan's feminist stances on sports media and anti-sexist commentaries also allowed FS1 to claim that it was not biased toward conservatives, as several other pundits under the Fox Sports brand such as Clay Travis and Jason Whitlock regularly trafficked in conservative and anti-political correctness sentiments on their Fox Sports programs.[68]

Nolan's ascension to a place of relative prominence in sports media was embedded in a broader sphere of gender politics and feminist gains in the mid-2010s. 2015 also saw an uptick in what Banet-Weiser terms "popular feminism" from celebrities and political figures. Examples of this trend spanned several industries, ranging from actresses like Jennifer Lawrence and Patricia Arquette calling for an end to a gendered pay gap among Hollywood actors to social media campaigns such as #shoutyourabortion and #sayhername encouraging female empowerment and activism.[69] These also followed efforts like actress Emma Watson's "HeForShe" campaign in 2014 advocating for gender equality at the United Nations General Assembly.[70] However, male backlash against the rise of feminism was seen in contemporary attacks such as the increasing popularity of sites like Barstool Sports and the "gamergate" scandal targeting women in the video gaming industry. Adrienne Massanari writes that, during this time, popular online communities like Reddit "implicitly reified the desires of certain groups (often young, white, cis-gendered heterosexual males) while ignoring and marginalizing others."[71]

Similar to *No Filter's* widely viewed segment on Ray Rice, a segment from *Garbage Time* in 2015 went viral on the strength of Nolan chastising Greg Hardy and the NFL for continual ignorance toward domestic violence. Hardy was convicted of domestic violence for, among other offenses, slamming his then-girlfriend down onto a "couch covered in assault rifles and/or shotguns" while also choking her and threatening to kill her.[72] Ultimately, during the sentencing, the victim did not show up to court, and the charges were dropped against Hardy, but he was still released from the Carolina Panthers' roster.[73] Hardy was later signed by the Dallas Cowboys and had his initial 10-game suspension reduced to four games following an appeal to an arbitrator.[74] Nolan began her segment by claiming that she had to scrap her plans for a fun show due to controversial comments by Hardy, specifically taking issue with Hardy claiming that he hoped he'd return from his suspension "guns blazing."[75] Nolan noted the irony that the quote was published on NFL.com, the league's official website, "endorsing it with your precious shield which, oh, I noticed has a pink ribbon on it this month because you care about women."

She preempted the sexist replies by sarcastically imitating her male detractors, assuming that they'd say: "relax…don't get your panties in a bunch."[76] Nolan then punctuated the segment by proclaiming that "Greg Hardy had to pretend to respect women for twelve minutes—JUST TWELVE MINUTES—and he couldn't even do that," before observing that "no one [in the media] stopped him." She ended by explaining her frustration that a male reporter proceeded to ask Hardy if he found Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback Blake Bortles' girlfriend attractive. An exasperated Nolan exclaimed:

> Christ, guys…Enough…what are we fucking doing? What matters to you? Because expecting a garbage human who has been punished for being garbage to come back from his suspension and immediately not resume being garbage is asking the bare minimum. And if me hoping that the league and the Cowboys and their PR people and the media could act with just a shred of human decency is ruining football for you, then I'm

> disappointed, I guess, in how much we're willing to accept in order to protect our precious Sundays.[77]

Immediate reaction to the segment was overwhelmingly positive. Writer D'Arcy Maine at rival network ESPN dubbed Nolan's commentary "the perfect response" to Hardy's remorseless remarks.[78] The *Philly Voice* said Nolan's segment "eviscerated" Hardy, praising her for "offering her objections to Hardy and members of the Cowboys media's comments much more eloquently than we ever possibly could."[79] Fox Sports proudly heralded the clip's success in terms of views, praising the clip's 1 million+ views as a record for the program.[80] However, rather than praising Nolan for her bravery in tackling the issue like they had a year earlier with her Ray Rice segment on *No Filter,* Fox commented on the number of views the clip amassed before promoting *Garbage Time* and her podcast more generally. This comparatively muted tone shift from giving her "a seat at the big boy table" a year earlier hinted at the FS1's reluctance to take specific and public political stances against the NFL and its media partners, while also promoting a profitable vision of popular feminism through Nolan's show.

Signifying a temporary form of honorary masculinity, Nolan was praised by male sports site BroBible for "destroying" Hardy, whom they termed a "POS" (an abbreviation for "piece of shit"). Significantly, they noted her past as a contributor for the site Guyism, and called Nolan their "sports media Internet spirit animal," whom they praised further for tearing Hardy "a new asshole" in addition to critiquing the NFL, the Cowboys, and NFL media.[81] In addition to BroBible's homophobic and violently gendered language, the elevation of voices like Nolan's on a site geared toward men mirrors the popularity of "smack talk" seen on sports talk radio originally and currently on Internet forums. Nolan's acceptance from sexist sites like BroBible through exhibiting rage demonstrates once more the masculine norms of sports punditry.

Specifically, Nolan's delivery echoed the outrage discourse perfected by male radio pundits decades earlier, boosting her image as the "cool sports girl" capable of joining male-centric sports discussions.

Praise for Nolan also came from non-sports media voices. Comedian Amy Poehler's organization *Amy Poehler's Smart Girls* singled out Nolan for praise, dubbing her "not the feminist sport media wants, but the one it needs."[82] *GQ* described Nolan as "a shooting star in the sports personality world," lauding her for bringing attention to "a toxic culture of cavalier misogyny."[83] *The Huffington Post* praised her for "challenging Greg Hardy, the NFL, and the media to do better," adding that they "couldn't argue" with any of the points she raised.[84] The praise for *Garbage Time* and Nolan from these outlets signifies again Banet-Weiser's concept of "empowered feminism" encroaching from other areas of American media into sports television. Casting Nolan as an empowered feminist speaking truth to power and as a fighter for greater female representation in sports media fortified standards of hegemonic feminism within popular discourse of the 2010s.

Nolan also drew condemnation and even threats. Specifically, she recalled an array of angry tweets ranging "from telling her to 'shut the fuck up' to 'leave your feminism out of my sports,'" to others featuring sexist slurs and threats.[85] Nolan recounted receiving hate mail from Dallas Cowboys fans who stuck up for Hardy, and noted that she would not want to be in studio with Hardy due to his violent history and her condemnation of his actions.[86] These sexist oppositions to Nolan's commentary reinforce sport—and the NFL more particularly—as what Oates terms "an especially important site for recuperating and reasserting powerful (if often conflicted) visions of manliness."[87] Hate-mail, threats, and other opposition from male viewers

and fans to Nolan embodied popular misogyny rising to meet Nolan's brand of popular feminism on *Garbage Time.*

Nolan's lambasting of Hardy, while once again critical of how the NFL and its media members view female football fans and colleagues, also carried racial dimensions. Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer demonstrates that media coverage of athletes accused of domestic violence is nearly entirely focused on Black athletes. As a result, she claims that "images of (and stories about) abusive white male athletes are, on the whole, lacking in the mainstream press."[88] This racial disparity in the mediated image of domestic abusers contributes to a racialized discourse reinforcing the image of the Black male athlete as a violent and suspicious figure. Mary G. McDonald concurs with this conclusion, arguing that "these destructive stereotypes further deflect attention away from the gender politics of violence against women."[89] Even as Nolan's response focused primarily on the role sports media played in allowing Hardy to largely skate by on these charges, her rhetoric secondarily reinforced the popular pathologizing of Black men in American society. Nolan's focus on Hardy's crime, as well as the lack of accountability he received from male sports media members, failed to paint a complete picture of the prevalence of domestic violence across racial demographics and its root causes.

In addition to the segment on Greg Hardy, Nolan used *Garbage Time* to critique several other examples of gender inequality in the sports and sports media industries. These included the pandering nature of professional and college sports teams conducting ladies' nights as promotional opportunities targeting female fans. Nolan chastised these efforts, sarcastically reminding these teams that "women can enjoy sports for the same reasons as men…we don't need everything to be pink, we don't need there to be wine, we aren't just there because big hunky athletic dudes are wearing tight pants… we like sports because sports are fucking

sweet!"[90] Here, Nolan advocates for equal treatment for female fans, but does so in a way that signals her "cool sports girl" status to presumably male viewers. However, in a tongue-in-cheek comment, Nolan reaffirmed a heteronormative vision of femininity, sarcastically urging the male athletes wearing the tight pants to "keep that shit up, please, because mama like!" She went on to note the irony in these assumptions by sports teams that women were unknowledgeable about games or only cared about sports for superficial reasons, citing a poll in which 51% of women identified as sports fans and claiming that, from a purely business perspective, sports teams should market to women the same way they market to men. Nolan also pushed back against the hegemonic construction of men being more knowledgeable about sports than women, adding that "while there are women who don't know the ins and outs of every sport, there are also plenty of men [who don't]…trust me, a lot of them work in this industry!" Nolan concluded by claiming that these types of efforts from sports teams separate people into two groups "sports fans" and "women" who "are only here for the free wine."[91] She then produced a scathing infomercial catering to "bro" stereotypes in a manner satirizing sports teams' hyperfeminine and coddling promotions targeting female fans.[92]

Other examples of *Garbage Time* fighting against entrenched sexism in sports media included Nolan delivering a biting rebuttal to a Fox Sports blog titled "How to Land a Husband at the Masters."[93] Nolan scathingly laid out the ways in which women are seen as passive spectators of sports like golf and are stereotyped as husband seekers in need of the civilizing influence of marriage. In contrast to ESPN's general practice of preventing on-air critiques of fellow employees and presenting a united front, Nolan saw her role at FS1 differently. She expanded on this in a 2016 interview with *GQ* that "the vision for FOX is to have a network full of people who have opinions as opposed to people who say the news," and that "if my message

doesn't fit in but I get that platform, then I'm reaching the people who most need to hear it."[94] These comments reinforced Nolan's commitment to exerting agency within a male, primarily conservative space through *Garbage Time*. FS1's refusal to censor its pundits set it apart from the more neutral ESPN, who publicly expressed a desire to, in the words of Mark Shapiro, be "all things to all people."[95] By contrast, FS1 mirrored an earlier claim of Horowitz for Fox Sports to produce "fearless" programming that courted controversy, a strategy prevalent across NewsCorp brands.[96] In allowing these internal critiques to go unchecked, FS1 placed Nolan's criticisms in line with the taboo-breaking image of these aforementioned programs, pursuing controversy and provocativeness as a brand identity, extending this edgy brand across gender lines.

Nolan also came to the defense of Buffalo Bills Special Teams Quality Control coach Kathryn Smith, who became the first full-time female coach in NFL history in 2016. Nolan began by dismissing the overt sexism of male fans who would assume women had no place in sports at all, instead focusing on a more seemingly rational crowd, whose questions would be along the lines of "is she qualified?" or "Really? A female coach?"[97] Nolan described this block of fans as "well intentioned," adding that "they don't understand sexism because they've never experienced it or anything like it, so they ask these questions, and then we jump down their throats and we label them sexist." In an attempt to debate these hypothetical opposition, Nolan shot down the idea of the Bills hiring Smith to gain positive publicity, asking a countering question about why the team Defensive Coordinator Rob Ryan, who is the brother of then-Head Coach Rex Ryan. Nolan then argued: "People get jobs for a number of reasons, until they do something that proves they don't also deserve the gig, who fucking cares?"[98] Anticipating further critique from male viewers who wanted to know when they could criticize Smith without being Sexist, Nolan claimed:

> you can…when she's done something worth criticizing. so far, she's been hired and is a woman. If you have a problem with either of those things, I have bad news- you're a sexist piece of shit. But, if at the end of next season, if she has somehow made the Bills worse, which, let's be honest, would be impressive, by all means let her have it. There are tons of male coaches in the league who suck at their jobs. If we can get a couple of horrendous women in there too, we'll know we finally made it. Asking these questions doesn't make you sexist, and genuinely, I'm sorry if that's the reaction you get. Not, asking these questions in an 'I'm just saying' kind of way where you don't actually want answers, you just want to make some point about how you're not allowed to talk about it, get that out of here guys.

Nolan's critique of this form of sexism, which relies on privileged men playing devil's advocate to hypothetical or real situations of gender inequality, again extends the show beyond critiques of sports and sports media. Here, she takes on a presumed male audience of sports fans and their perceived threat to ongoing male dominance of the NFL. By mixing these types of direct commentaries on sexism with earlier activities considered more masculine like chugging beers or running a "beer mile," Nolan positioned herself again as someone who stands up for women while also still standing firmly in the overwhelmingly male sports media complex.

After its first season, *Garbage Time* won a Sports Emmy award for "Outstanding Social TV Experience" in 2016.[99] Fox Sports, when promoting *Garbage Time's* upcoming 2016 season, praised the show's "HUGE SOCIAL AUDIENCE" as evidence of its success. Nolan's significant online presence promoted both her and FS1 to web viewers, reaching new audiences who might not tune into Skip Bayless or Colin Cowherd, both of whom identified more closely with older media like print and talk radio. This also mirrors aspects of Jenkins' theories on convergence culture, where major media conglomerates pursue an expansion opportunity where "content that succeeds in one sector can spread across other platforms."[100] *Garbage Time,* and Nolan's career more generally, represent a disruption of the industrial flow from old media forms to new media forms. Rather than imitating ESPN's approach of putting established television

properties like *Pardon the Interruption* and *First Take* on the Internet, FS1 reversed this pattern, seeking out Nolan's talents as a web presence via *No Filter* and eventually moved her to cable with *Garbage Time.*

Even with *Garbage Time's* Emmy win and FS1's promotion of the program, FS1's programming choices still largely catered to the male sports fan and the male sports pundit. For example, *First Things First* still airs daily at 6:30 AM EST, *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* runs daily from 9:30-11AM EST each morning and *Speak for Yourself* runs daily for an hour in the 5-6 PM EST time slot. These programs were all in more prominent time slots than Nolan's *Garbage Time,* which initially aired on Sunday evenings at 9:30 PM EST and eventually moved to Wednesday nights at 11:30 EST. In this challenging Sunday night time slot, *Garbage Time* competed with NBC's *Sunday Night Football* and popular non-sports Sunday night programs like HBO's *Game of Thrones* and AMC's *The Walking Dead,* making attracting live television viewers a difficult task for the fledgling program.

In giving *Garbage Time* such a challenging viewing spot, FS1 also demonstrated that they understood that relying on traditional viewership metrics would not be appropriate for the program. Rather, they understood that *Garbage Time* was meant to be consumed across television, the Internet, and social media platforms. Here, FS1 treated *Garbage Time* as a proving ground not just for Nolan's talent, but for female punditry. The unenviable time slot suggests that not many people would watch a female-led pundit program, but Nolan's ability to find a digital audience in spite of these restrictions signaled that a market existed for women to enter televised sports punditry. However, her success in playing the part of the "cool sports girl" limited the counterhegemonic potential for women to disrupt the masculine norms of the industry and fine success practicing alternative forms of femininity. Nolan's various performances of

heterosexuality, coupled with her adoption of standards of masculinity such as drinking alcohol and sports knowledge, suggest that her success in the genre is in part due to her ability to perform the masculinity of sports fans while maintaining other markers of hegemonic femininity.

Conclusions

Nolan hosted *Garbage Time* until 2017, when she abruptly left the program and, eventually, the network. She claimed that FS1 "wanted to move me out to LA and make it [*Garbage Time*] bigger and I didn't trust them…so I left."[101] She also singled out instances of clashing with producers at Fox Sports during live broadcasts of *Garbage Time* from the 2017 Super Bowl and claims she rebuffed FS1's offers to host an hour-long daily show. Nolan's television silence occurred at FS1 despite earlier promises from the network that "her TV exposure on FS1 will increase five-fold."[102] *The Washington Post*, however, suspected that Nolan was less important to network executives than shows like *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* and *First Things First* that dominated what the *Post* termed "FS1's daytime shout-fest."[103] FS1's conflict with Nolan over *Garbage Time's* format and content ultimately signaled that her approach and opinions were not as popular or important to executives and fans as the male-driven pundit shows dominating FS1's airtime and ratings.

Nolan's eventual exit from FS1 also coincided with a shift in leadership due to Jamie Horowitz's dismissal as part of a sexual harassment investigation. Despite Horowitz's abrupt dismissal, his successor at Fox Sports, Eric Shanks reiterated a commitment to "execut[ing] our playbook" in terms of programming. Specifically, Shanks insisted that "everyone here" at FS1 "has set this strategy and vision" of centering debate and pundit programs as the network's

priority.[104] In continuing to pledge fealty to Horowitz's vision of empowering pundits and debate shows, FS1 entrenched itself as a more polemical version of ESPN. With the departure of Nolan, however, the network limited the scope of these opinions to once again being primarily male, symbolically erasing female participation in its renewed emphasis on hypermasculine punditry.

Eventually, after months of not appearing on television in any capacity, Nolan found a home at ESPN, appearing as a guest panelist on shows like *Dan LeBatard is Highly Questionable* while producing and starring on her own show, *Always Late with Katie Nolan. Always Late* premiered in 2018 on ESPN's streaming service, ESPN+, and eventually moved onto television and ESPN2 for its second season in 2019 in a Thursday 12:30 AM timeslot.[105] Like *Garbage Time, Always Late* involved both commentary on sports issues and comedic sketches and situations featuring sports personalities and figures. Nolan expressed a desire to fill a function similar to comedic newscasters such as former *The Daily Show* employees John Oliver and Jon Stewart, hoping to deliver comic yet incisive monologues on current events in sports.[106] The potential for convergence between Nolan's television and online viewership was noted by her new employers at ESPN. Specifically, ESPN executive Ryan Spoon stated that Nolan "is most prominent on digital" media, adding that "that's not a flaw; it's by design." Spoon laid out ESPN's strategy with Nolan, claiming that "building invested fans today requires that you reach them in a variety of ways and not be limited by past conventions."[107] Putting Nolan on streaming platforms and guest roles while male pundits occupied more prominent television roles demonstrates ESPN's reluctance to center female voices in prominent pundit roles while nominally promoting them through ancillary distribution models.

Supplementing Nolan's rise to fame, other "cool sports girls" emerged during this time frame at both ESPN and FS1, as well as on online outlets. These include Mina Kimes, Michelle

Beadle, and Sarah Spain at ESPN, Charissa Thompson at FS1, Kay Adams at the NFL Network, and Kayce Smith at Barstool. While Beadle, Thompson, and Adams were presented largely as hosts and anchors rather than pundits, their unabashed fandom of various players and teams distinguished them from other women in hosting roles. Continuing a theme touched on earlier in this chapter, Adams regularly gives Fantasy football lineup advice on NFL Network, positioning her as being just as knowledgeable as her male peers. Interestingly enough, Adams has attained this role as a keeper of football knowledge while also partnering with numerous cosmetics and fashion brands, demonstrating her commitment to upholding certain standards of femininity while subverting other standards simultaneously.[108] At ESPN, Spain and Kimes have taken on more direct roles as commentators and pundits across several shows, with Kimes attaining the coveted role of Senior Writer at ESPN.[109]

The ability for these (mainly white) women to find places alongside their male peers did not come without opposition, as many male detractors, especially online, continue to subject female sports pundits to sexual harassment they do not extend to men in the industry.[110] Additionally, in a manner similar to Nolan's early days at Guyism, Kayce Smith rose to fame through a brand that contributed to this online harassment in Barstool, hosting a podcast for Barstool with a double entendre title concerning women in sports- the *Dime Package Podcast*.[111] The relative success and increasing visibility of these women in traditionally male roles signals a limited amount of progress in achieving greater representation for women in the industry. However, the prevalence of the "cool sports girl" tropes across various networks demonstrates the finite limits of this advancement, as, like "The Fabulous Sports Babe" decades earlier, these women often were limited to talking about popular men's sports in a manner mimicking the vituperative "smack talk" of male pundits.

While it did not garner the ratings of previous hits like *First Take, Garbage Time* nevertheless remained an important disruptor of the hypermasculine "shout show" genre of punditry practiced by *Pardon the Interruption, First Take,* and *Speak for Yourself.* Through calling out of systemic sexism in the sports television industry, Nolan contributed to what Oates terms "an important interruption of the dominant narratives of pro football in the twenty-first century" by progressive journalists and other feminist advocates.[112] Programs like *No Filter* and *Garbage Time* represent not only the rise of feminist sports punditry on television, but also reveal its limitations. For as successful as female pundits like Nolan may be, the virulent opposition they receive from male detractors represent a still entrenched division in mainstream sports television. *Garbage Time* regularly called out the frequency and power of sexism within sports and sports media, but it did so largely without taking up an intersectional analysis of these issues. The female perspective on *Garbage Time* defaulted to Nolan's white, heteronormative perspective. And even as Nolan interviewed several journalists and athletes of color, *Garbage Time* nevertheless represented the pervasive whiteness of the industry through a lack of engagement with issues of systemic racism in sports.

Mimicking Nolan's career, the conclusion of this dissertation returns to ESPN from FS1 in 2017, where it interrogates ways that the "Worldwide Leader in Sports" maintained its universally appealing image in a more overtly political sports scene of the Trump era. I specifically investigate how the network responded to issues of race and gender through its partnership with Barstool Sports and its promotion and eventual demotion of Black female pundit Jemele Hill. The conclusion also provides an avenue to observe how ESPN responded to the inroads FS1 and other competitors made in the televised sports punditry market.

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CONCLUSION: ESPN'S RACIAL AND GENDER POLITICS IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

> While we acknowledge that our employees have interests beyond sports, it is essential that we not compromise our authority as the worldwide leader in sports coverage.
> - John Skipper, ESPN President, November 6, 2017[1]

The sports pundit, either as a panelist on a debate show or as a lone commentator, achieved a firm foothold in the sports media landscape with FS1's emergence as a challenger to ESPN's dominance of pundit programming on cable sports television in 2016. Following Donald Trump's election in the fall of 2016, sports television faced a dilemma in how to respond to a moment of ever-increasing cultural and political polarization. More specifically, networks were faced with how to reconcile the increasing anti-Trump political activity of the athletes and teams they covered with a resurgence of overt racism and sexism in their white and male audience bases. While FS1, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5, embraced this polarization and controversy as a channel-wide brand through hiring and promoting firebrand pundits like Skip Bayless, Colin Cowherd, and Jason Whitlock, ESPN attempted to maintain a more multi-faceted approach to content, promoting its own pundit programs while still trumpeting its news and live event coverage as hallmarks of the channel's identity.

The dissertation's conclusion circles back to this dissertation's initial example of Trump ally—and Trump Presidential Medal of Freedom honoree—Rush Limbaugh's brief and tumultuous employment with ESPN. I argue that ESPN's strategy of both embracing and avoiding political controversy was a reactive strategy triggered by conservative criticism of its practices. To interrogate the political implications of this strategy, I use two brief case studies from 2017, the year following Trump's election, to analyze the network's enacting racial and gender politics as the Trump era dawned: ESPN's brief and controversial partnership with

Barstool Sports, and their disciplining of *SportsCenter* anchor and pundit Jemele Hill in the wake of two notable anti-Trump tweets. After driving the televised sports punditry market in the 2000s and early 2010s, ESPN found itself responding to disruptors such as FS1 and Barstool.

I argue that as a response to challenges from FS1 and fringe voices like Barstool and Outkick the Coverage, the network trended in a more apolitical and conservative direction to secure market shares they had reached in prior decades. By simultaneously promoting Barstool and distancing itself from Hill, ESPN disavowed nominally liberal positions and endorsed a white, heteronormative, male framework. ESPN's support of its female employees who raised concerns about Barstool and its simultaneous condemnation of Hill also speak to the intersection of race and gender at the network. I contend that Hill's status as a politically active Black woman condemning a sitting white male President threatened ESPN's cross-demographic appeal, and the network's censoring of Hill demonstrates the primacy of whiteness and maleness to both the network and its presumed audience.

"Saturdays are for the Boys": *Van Talk* and ESPN Female Backlash to Barstool

Male-focused blogs and social media conglomerates such as Barstool Sports represent an extension of traditional sport punditry by celebrating hypermasculinity while also giving more direct voice to the white male backlash of the Tea Party and Trumpism. Barstool Sports is a multi-media entity, inking deals with mainstream and satellite radio providers while also providing more explicit and irreverent commentary on new media forms such as podcasts and blogs. They perform masculinity through adopting slogans like "Saturdays are for the boys," associating themselves with college football and partying. This ability to be irreverent and

offensive was used by Barstool to suggest that they were less establishment and more "authentic" than ESPN and FS1. Barstool's reliance on outrage discourse and shock humor also intimated that the supposed inclusiveness and diversity of major networks was an obstacle to achieving authenticity in sports takes.

Established as a Boston-based newspaper centered on gambling advice and advertisements in 2003, Barstool fully entered the mainstream in the 2010s, after the popularity of *First Take* was established. Barstool heavily engages with its primarily male fan base, colloquially known as "stoolies," on social media sites such as Twitter, further disconnecting them from the old media practices of television networks like ESPN and FS1. Barstool fashions itself as an outlet for allegedly displaced white male sport consumers who feel alienated by greater ethnic and gender diversity on mainstream sports channels, as well as in American popular culture more generally. Led by Dave Portnoy, Barstool also styles itself as a collection of fans rather than media members, proudly demonstrating its allegiance to various teams and players as well as their refusal to cave to the interests of corporate sponsors. *Entrepreneur* characterized Barstool *Sports* as "a wide-ranging, unabashedly profane men's lifestyle blog…" and "…a much-imitated, never-duplicated resource for the latest on sports, entertainment, and women—the tentpoles of the dude zeitgeist…"[2] Founder Dave Portnoy summarized Barstool's attitude toward controversy by exclaiming: "we don't run from controversy—we fan the fires."[3]

What continues to set Barstool apart from the sports media establishment is their constant critique of the institutional and cultural practices of sport media, in addition to their reactionary cultural politics. Other "outsider" media outlets such as *Deadspin, The Ringer,* and *Awful Announcing* routinely critique the quality of ESPN and FS1's programming and commentators, often highlighting errors or problems with specific personalities on large networks. However,

Barstool distinguishes itself from these other critics of major sport media through peppering their sports and pop culture commentaries with misogyny, homophobia, and denials of ongoing racism. Barstool utilizes outrage discourse in an attempt to satirize the excesses of what they see as outrage or victim culture from primarily left-wing voices, and, in so doing, also rearticulate whiteness and maleness as a sort of new "silent majority" in American sports media discourse.

Barstool also represents a more explicit form of backlash against feminism through its ongoing harassment of its numerous female critics in the sport media industry. Similar to the "gamergate" harassment of females in the video game industry, Portnoy regularly instructs his "stoolies" to insult and harass women who criticize Barstool, ranging for calls to "slowly suffocate" them online through spamming messages and tweets to outright sexual harassment of women in sports media.[4] Barstool's brand of misogyny and efforts to maintain sports and sports culture as male territory manifest through the site's posting pictures of attractive women on their site labeled "smokeshows." This continued a trend in broader sports media of hypersexualizing female athletes and sports reporters and framing women's participation through a heteronormative male lens.[5]

In 2016, despite these aforementioned controversies, Peter Chernin and his media investment company, The Chernin Group, invested heavily in Barstool. The multi-million-dollar investment signaled Barstool's power and influence over sports media, and appeared to validate what *The New York Times* termed "…the gospel of Portnoy: Say what's on your mind---and if anyone has a problem with it, fight back."[6] Further connecting Barstool to the ongoing rivalry between Fox and ESPN was the fact that Chernin, Barstool's newest investor, was previously an executive for Fox's film and television operations.[7] Chernin's investment in Barstool, coupled with his previous experience at Fox, aligns Barstool with what former FS1 president Jamie

Horowitz termed the "fearless" and controversial nature of NewsCorp programming across its various brands.

Van Talk, the program that ESPN contracted to televise with Barstool, exhibited a different style of punditry from both ESPN and FS1 shows. Rather than attempting to demonstrate connections to professional athletes and coaches like Skip Bayless and Stephen A. Smith, the show's two pundits, "PFT Commenter" (Eric Sollenberger) and "Big Cat" (Dan Katz) performed exaggerated caricatures of superfans. Rather than attempting to aggressively prove their sports knowledge, they adopt humorous "bro" personas satirizing overly zealous Chicago sports fans (in the case of Big Cat) or online trolls in the comments section of websites (PFT Commenter). The recognition of these two groups as popular subjects for parody reveals the preponderance of masculinity across sports media, as demonstrated by the rise of these two characters through the success of their immensely popular *Pardon my Take* podcast. The name of the wildly popular podcast itself was a pun satirizing the titles of both *Pardon the Interruption* and *First Take,* with the podcast lampooning the tendencies of pundits on those programs to relying on excess and outrage discourse in making their points. In partnering with Barstool to produce *Van Talk,* ESPN attempted to expand its brand into the young "bro" demographic previously sought by their channels ESPN2 and ESPNU. ESPN's desire to attach their name to Barstool demonstrates the market validity of this sub-demographic of males 18-34 to television executives. It also symbolizes ESPN's efforts to "co-opt the resistance" of competitors like Barstool while attempting to distance itself from Barstool's racist and sexist politics.[8]

While the partnership between these two companies appeared to make sense in theory, it was quickly opposed by numerous female employees at ESPN. Most notably, *NFL Countdown* host and former college football reporter Samantha "Sam" Ponder used her Twitter account to

draw attention to several misogynistic posts directed at her by Portnoy, who labeled Ponder a "bible thumping freak" and described her as "a chick that has a job where the #1 requirement is you make men hard."[9] Sexist comments like Portnoy's fit into what Guy Harrison observes as an industry obsession with physical appearance as a primary qualifier for female sports journalists. Harrison contends that there remains "a perception among observers that a high level of attractiveness is *the* consideration for women in the industry while it is *a* consideration for men."[10] At the time of Ponder's public complaint, ESPN's partnership of turning *Pardon My Take* into *Van Talk* was "eight months in the making," according to *Sport Business Journal.* ESPN saw Big Cat and PFT Commentor as "supremely talented, potential stars who would appeal to a younger demographic that is not watching television, let alone ESPN."[11] This quote reveals ESPN's continual pursuit of the young male demographic, accomplished previously with the youth-branded ESPN2 and its airing of the X-Games.[12] The migration of many of these viewers away from traditional television viewing to the Internet and away from ESPN demonstrates an industrial shift toward online content, as Barstool had built its male-focused brand on the irreverence of internet culture.

Ultimately, ESPN and President John Skipper severed ties with Barstool and ended *Van Talk* after its debut episode. This cancellation occurred despite the fact that ESPN was "happy with the show's content and its ratings," which made the program "ESPN2's second highest-rated show among 18- to 34-year-old men."[13] Internal resistance at the network, led by Ponder's tweet highlighting Barstool's open history of misogyny and sexism, proved too much for Skipper and ESPN to overcome in their quest to recapture the coveted 18-34 male demographic. In this instance, ESPN judged internal strife and its potential to sour the partnership to be more important than any financial or ratings gains by hiring more hypermasculine pundits. Skipper's

ability to weigh competing personal and commercial concerns nominally empowered female employees at ESPN and differentiated the network from anti-political correctness bastions like Barstool, who prided themselves as a network of men producing content for other men.

Jemele Hill, Donald Trump and ESPN's Double Standards

Around the same time that ESPN began (and ended) their partnership with Barstool in 2017, Black female pundit (and *SportsCenter* anchor) Jemele Hill began to draw the ire of her employers. Hill had risen to a position of prominence at ESPN, highlighted by her ascension to an anchor position on the 6 PM edition of *SportsCenter*, re-branded as *SC6*. ESPN promoted the rebranding of *SportsCenter* around Hill and co-anchor Michael Smith's talents, claiming that *SC6* would have "a deliberate and well-paced conversational format in which they discuss sports topics, news, culture, and social issues."[14] *SC6* included segments with Hill and Smith conducting interviews, games, and comedic sketches, mirroring a similar strategy on the 12 AM *SportsCenter* in which anchor/host Scott Van Pelt engaged in monologues and other features deviating from straightforward news delivery. This rebranding of the network's flagship news program as a center for opinions and conversations extends Chapter 1's discussion of "infotainment" on *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight*, with opinions taking an even greater role in the wake of the increasing availability of sports information and scores on smartphones and the Internet. The pairing of Hill and Smith on *SC6*, coming off the success of their debate program *His & Hers*, demonstrates ESPN's superficial commitment to diversity on camera while also extending their marketing of Blackness as a sign of edginess and difference previously practiced with Stuart Scott on *SportsCenter* and *SportsNight* and Stephen A. Smith on *First Take.*

Hill was a frequent user of Twitter, using the platform to promote her own work and various ESPN projects. However, Hill posted perhaps her most notable tweet on September 11, 2017, approximately a month after Trump's refusal to condemn the "Unite The Right" Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in which Neo-Nazis, Alt-Right members, and Ku Klux Klansmen marched and instigated violence while protesting the removal of confederate monuments. Hill tweeted: "Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/ other white supremacists."[15] Hill's anti-Trump comments did not immediately result in a suspension, leading to claims of a liberal bias from critics like Travis and Portnoy. These claims frequently contrasted ESPN's initial refusal to suspend Hill with the network's handling of MLB commentator (and former Boston Red Sox pitcher) Curt Schilling. Schilling faced multiple suspensions, reprimands, and, eventually, termination for online posts ranging from posts comparing Muslims to Nazis and a post demonizing trans women in the wake of several states' anti-trans bathroom laws. These criticisms glossed over the fact that Hill did not repeatedly violate the company's social media policy like Schilling had, instead recasting Schilling as some sort of white male martyr for extreme right-wing politics.

ESPN publicly disassociated itself from Hill's tweets, stating that "the comments on Twitter from Jemele Hill regarding the President do not represent the position of ESPN…We have addressed this with Jemele and she recognizes her actions were inappropriate."[16] By refusing to suspend Hill while also distancing itself from her comments, ESPN attempted to appease both Trump-supporting conservatives and liberal supporters of Hill. Following this, the Trump administration interjected itself further into the supposedly apolitical space of sports and sports media by attacking Hill and ESPN directly. Trump himself attacked ESPN and Hill in a series of tweets, with one suggesting that ESPN "is paying a really big price for its politics and

bad programming," demanding that the network "Apologize for untruth!"[17] White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders expressed strong disagreement with Hill's comments, deeming the tweet a "fireable offense."[18]

The Trump administration's quick condemnation of Hill and ESPN reflected the power of cultural conservatism in the wake of his election, and while several notable voices from within and outside of sports media defended Hill's right to free speech and her comments, ESPN's refusal to stand beside one of its most prominent voices bolstered Trump's cultural and industrial power. Hill backtracked slightly, reiterating that her "comments on Twitter expressed my personal beliefs," but then clarifying that "my regret is that my comments and the public way I made them painted ESPN in an unfair light." Guy Harrison et al. write that popular backlash to Hill's tweets on social media sites like Facebook "often interjected race and gender into the discussion to support or discredit the validity of Hill's controversial ideas."[19] Hill's social discipline from non-ESPN voices represented a hegemonically constructed backlash to her antiracist viewpoint, as this criticism came not solely from Trump and his administration, but also from civilians on social media. These attempts to silence her commentary symbolize a possessive investment in whiteness, even if all of its defenders in this case eschewed the white nationalist politics of Trump and his supporters.

ESPN then suspended Hill approximately one month later for "violating social media rules." Specifically, the network cited not her anti-Trump tweet, but rather Hill's tweet urging "fans who disagree with Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, who said players who disrespect the flag will not play for his team, should boycott the team's advertisers."[20] Most telling here is the fact that Hill was not suspended for her criticism of Trump, but, rather, for her calls for boycotts of NFL corporate sponsors, several of whom also partner with ESPN. ESPN's ultimate refusal to

back Hill also speaks to a racial double standard at the network. While ESPN supported Ponder and her tweets in the face of sexist criticism from Barstool, they refused to stand by Hill's tweets calling out racism at the highest levels of American government and did not defend her against the Trumpian backlash that ensued.

ESPN's response to this controversy echoes a series of earlier controversies on *First Take* involving race and gender. As mentioned in Chapter 3, ESPN quickly suspended and refused to renew the contract of frequent guest panelist Rob Parker for his comments disparaging the Blackness of NFL quarterback Robert Griffin III. However, Stephen A. Smith was only suspended for a week for insinuating that domestic violence should not be "provoked" by women. Smith's suspension was enacted in part after Michelle Beadle's tweet highlighting the offensiveness of Smith's words, in a manner similar to Ponder's tweet calling attention to barstool's misogyny. In comparison to Parker's ill-informed and non-factual statements on Black identity, Hill's tweets did not occur on the air in her capacity as a pundit, but rather on her personal Twitter page. Only three years after their suspension of Smith, ESPN was more willing to partner with a brand widely associated with sexism and misogyny than it was to defend one of its most prominent employees' antiracist views.

Hill eventually was removed from the coveted 6 PM EST *SportsCenter* anchor position in 2018 and currently writes for *The Atlantic* after leaving ESPN. Hill's criticisms of the Trump administration, and the backlash they sparked from the online community and other sports pundits, reveal the intersectionality of the sports media punditry industry. Pundits like Hill achieved success while also being relentlessly harangued by conservative critics for expressing liberal opinions on issues of race and gender in sports and culture. The reaction to Hill's criticisms of Trump and other topics drew attention from male-centric sites like Barstool and

Outkick, with Outkick's Clay Travis in particular decrying what he saw as Hill's overreliance on identity politics. This reactionary rhetoric also gestures toward the symbiotic nature of punditry, as sports pundits gain material in pointing out the shortcomings of their rivals in a manner similar to warring political pundits.

ESPN's aversions to controversy allowed whiteness and maleness to remain the unchallenged and entrenched norms of their anticipated audience. These expectations governing ESPN's presentations of nonwhite and non-male on-air talent suggested an oscillation between erudite Black male figures like Michael Wilbon, Kevin Blackistone, and Louis Riddick, and performances of more stereotypical hip-hop discourse seen through the performances of Stuart Scott and Stephen A. Smith. Hill's roles at the network permeated between these two categories, as her punditry relied not only on her journalistic background with the *Detroit Free Press* and early appearances on *The Sports Reporters*, but also on her credentials as a super fan of Michigan State Athletics, the Detroit Pistons, and various hip-hop artists. Hill's attacks against Trump, Jerry Jones, and the NFL's corporate sponsors represented a political and financial line ESPN refused to cross. Her suspension occurred despite ESPN's decision to produce frequent discussions concerning Colin Kaepernick, racial injustice and police brutality on shows like *First Take*, *Around the Horn*, and *SportsCenter*, despite the often-rancorous opposition to Kaepernick's protests. In silencing a politically active Black female sports pundit while giving more latitude to their white and male pundits and even partnering with an openly chauvinist network that thrived on racial and gender controversy, ESPN revealed its own latent sexism and racism in responding to Hill.

Summary and Implications

This dissertation chronicled and analyzed the racial, gendered, and industrial politics of sports punditry on cable television. It began by tracing the whiteness and maleness of the genre over from its roots in print and talk radio in the twentieth century. It also contended that early sports punditry programs adopted conventions from their political counterparts as a means of not only filling a 24-hour air space cheaply and efficiently, but also to capitalize on the popularity of polarization in the political sphere. Drawing on the preexisting spirit of confrontation present across both political and sports talk radio, sports television ably placed preexisting radio and print pundits on their airwaves in formats ranging from simulcasts of radio shows to roundtable discussions like *The Sports Reporters*.

When pundit-driven programming emerged as a staple of sports television on ESPN in the early 2000s, it reflected the racial and gender politics of its time, with shows like *Pardon the Interruption* echoing concepts of a postracial America, emphasizing a visual multiculturalism sought by various political administrations and corporations. These gestures toward interracial unity and a solidarity of masculinity across racial lines also served to maintain sport as a male preserve. *PTI* deliberately mimicked the format of political debate programs like *Crossfire,* but dropped those programs' bitterness and partisan rancor, depicting sports debate as a site of racial equality between two respected peers. In the wake of *PTI's* runaway success, ESPN produced other shows featuring pundits like *Around the Horn*, which mimicked game shows, reinforcing the notion of sport as a game-like escape from politics and serious news stories.

Beginning with the 2012 rebranding of *First Take* featuring Skip Bayless and Stephen A. Smith, ESPN used its pundit programs to stage racial tension between Black and white pundits.

While this strategy came on the heels of the popularity of Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street activists carving out careers as pundits on Fox News and MSNBC, respectively, *First Take* presented this interracial tension through heated debates on the merits of athletes who stood in for whiteness and Blackness. Specifically, Skip Bayless, a white man, attacking LeBron James and Stephen A. Smith, a Black man, attacking Tim Tebow led to massive ratings for the program. Even as the program inspired legions of hate-watchers and anti-fans, its success proved to be enduring for ESPN, as the spirit of confrontation, however staged, between Bayless and Smith, reflected and added to the tone of racial antagonism prevalent across political cable talk and debate programs.

Both pundits' styles and personas inspired Fox Sports 1 (FS1), who hired *First Take* producer Jamie Horowitz to rebrand the entire channel around opinion and debate shows to compensate for their comparatively miniscule live sports and reporting budgets. I argued that the prominence of an outspoken conservative voice like Jason Whitlock on *Speak For Yourself* allowed FS1's parent company NewsCorp to extend its conservatism into its holdings in the sport market, all under the guise of upholding sport as an apolitical escape and meritocracy. And even as some strong female pundits like Katie Nolan emerged on FS1, their marginalization relative to their male peers at the network support the idea that the network, and to a lesser extent the industry, catered to male sports opinions. While Nolan eventually resurfaced at ESPN, the misogynistic backlash she and other pundits continuously face demonstrates dominant cultural expectations of sport punditry being a male-centric position.

Within this context, the popularity and success of televised sports punditry reifies the concept of outrage discourse as a viable currency and identity for sports networks. In a manner similar to the career of the first pundit mentioned in the introduction, Rush Limbaugh, televised

sports punditry mimics the tenor and format of numerous political pundit-driven shows but attempts to leave the racial and gendered politics of those shows behind. However, through its reification of the hypermasculinity of its pundits and its reliance on staging racial tensions in its debates, televised sports punditry reproduces many of the same conservative and regressive politics of its expressly political peer programs. Even while racial diversity and, occasionally, gender diversity are seen in the genre in front of the camera, the desire of networks to maximize their profits and viewership largely prevents these pundits from discussing and addressing systemic racial and gendered inequalities in the sports and sports media they cover.

Future Directions and Limitations

As I face the task of continuing to interrogate how racial and gender politics operate in the ever-changing industry of sports media, I see several opportunities to extend the work of critiquing televised sports punditry. First, I believe that the methods I used in this dissertation should be extended to explore the Internet and social media, as the increasing numbers of people severing contracts with their cable companies has led to the migration of various television strongholds onto social media and streaming networks. I also want to devote future research to the significant uptick of white male grievance politics in the Trump era present on websites and other media productions of brands like Barstool Sports and Outkick the Coverage.

Second, the cable sports television industry itself is under constant changes in personnel across channels and programs. Since I began writing this dissertation, Jason Whitlock briefly took his penchant for Black criticism of politically liberal and active Black athletes to Outkick, teaming with Clay Travis to extend what David Theo Goldberg terms “antiracialist” resentment

to a primarily Internet-based space. Furthermore, Stephen A. Smith and Skip Bayless continue to command significant salaries at their respective networks, demonstrating the enduring power and popularity of hypermasculine male pundits. At ESPN, conservative firebrand and frequent *First Take* pundit Will Cain jumped to Fox News in 2020 to pursue other, more directly political opportunities such as hosting the weekend broadcasts of *Fox and Friends*. Cain's move back to political media from *First Take* and ESPN further illustrates the permeability between the boundaries of sports punditry and political punditry in an age where Trump and his supporters frequently decry what they see as an "over-politicization" of previously "politically neutral" cultural arenas like sports. Stephen A. Smith also continued to find success at ESPN, remaining on *First Take* while also doing his national radio show and expanding to a variety program called *Stephen A's World* on ESPN's new streaming service ESPN+.

Industrially, several key executives responsible for the rise of sports punditry have joined an upstart streaming sports media company called DAZN (pronounced "da zone"). DAZN now employs former ESPN President John Skipper, who promoted Hill and Michael Smith to the coveted 6 PM *SportsCenter* timeslot, as its chairman. Additionally, DAZN and Skipper hired former ESPN and FS1 executive Jamie Horowitz as "head of content" in 2019, with the stated goal of "…grow[ing] the sports streamer's original content slate beyond live rights."[21] The reemergence of Horowitz and Skipper in the industry despite their respective firings from major networks demonstrates a degree of masculine privilege prevalent in sports media, as old voices proven to generate profits and leadership with television formulas were more valued than new and innovative perspectives. I envision my future research projects investigating the concept of "keeping politics out of sports" as a defense of whiteness, reifying Coakley's "great sport myth" of sport as an apolitical meritocracy where the only partisanship occurred along differing fan

lines. Allegations of ESPN in particular having a "liberal bias" in both its pundits and programming were (and remain) trumpeted by "outsider" voices like Barstool's Dave Portnoy and Outkick the Coverage's Clay Travis.

I also want to acknowledge the limitations of this dissertation's scope and sequences. First, it focuses on television, an ever-changing medium that is constantly being redefined. While I attempted to qualify the variance in audiences of these programs, the difference in airtimes from *Pardon the Interruption* and *Speak for Yourself's* early evening timeslots to *First Take's* multi-hour morning runtime suggest that these programs would be watched live by different sub-demographics of primarily male viewership. More specifically, *First Take* airs from 9-12 AM, a time when many viewers are traditionally at work, meaning that viewers who watched large chunks of *First Take* might be in a different socioeconomic grouping as the people who watched *PTI* or *Speak For Yourself* after work ended. While these programs all placed debate segments on the Internet through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook as well as on the channels' websites and YouTube channels, the variance in age, socioeconomic status, and occupations of these audiences is something meriting further consideration.

Second, other programs at ESPN and FS1 beyond the ones studied in this dissertation reflecting a growing diversity of both pundits and subject matter at these networks have emerged. Several programs at ESPN expanded the racial and ethnic diversity of pundits with programs like the *Dan Le Batard Show with Stugotz* (2004-2020), *Highly Questionable with Dan Le Batard* (2011-2020), and *High Noon* (2017-2020). Le Batard's irreverent style and penchant for veering into popular culture commentary and issues of race in sports and American society dated back to his days as a columnist for the *Miami Herald.* Le Batard, a first-generation Cuban-American, frequently had his father Gonzalo, affectionately known as "Papi" on *Highly*

Questionable, where Papi often sparred with guests and told jokes while acting as a moderator of sorts. *High Noon* starred African-American pundit (and frequent *Around the Horn* and *Highly Questionable* panelist) Bomani Jones and Filipino-American pundit Pablo S. Torre discussing contemporary sports issues in a manner similar to *PTI.*

As mentioned earlier, FS1 paired Skip Bayless with loquacious ex-NFL player Shannon Sharpe on *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* and also aired *First Things First* with Nick Wright and former NFL receiver Cris Carter, who was eventually let go due to sexual harassment claims. These continuous initiatives to employ more diverse voices as sports pundits demonstrate the genre's recognition of *PTI* and *First Take's* success and the translatability of the formula across channels and timeslots. If I were to analyze these programs, I would employ similar methodologies to interrogate how these pundits perform race and masculinity on their programs and see how they compare to other pundits and their shows. I would also attempt to understand how their successes and failures in maintaining their shows tie into their engagement with the racial, gender, and political currents in which they operate.

Third, the construction of an archive for many of these shows proved to be an exceptionally difficult task. Recently launched programs such as *Speak for Yourself* and *Garbage Time With Katie Nolan* had readily available YouTube archives of their shows and segments, making it easier to conduct close readings and find trends across episodes and segments. Also, the longevity of shows like *PTI* and *First Take* made it more difficult to narrow down topics and foci for analyzing these programs in comparison to the less-tenured pundit programs featured in the dissertation, as they have gone through occasional changes in personnel and/or style. A potentially helpful addition to this methodology could have involved consulting the audio

archives of *PTI's* podcasts, but the vastness of the date range coupled with the absence of visual symbols made this methodological adjustment not feasible.

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic paused the professional and collegiate sports worlds for several months, shows like *Pardon the Interruption*, *First Take,* and *Speak for Yourself* remained on the air, with their basic formats and conventions intact. The enduring popularity of these shows even during a time of reduced sporting activity suggests that their popularity is not solely tied to direct discussions of current sports, but rather on their performances of outrage discourse, hypermasculinity, and racial tension, which largely operated outside the scope of any single sport, league, or athlete. The popularity of outrage discourse across both sports and politics, egged on by comments like Trump's "locker room talk" defense of sexual assault, reinforces the toxic masculinity and patriarchy that have become synonymous with punditry across all media forms. And while various political administrations and social media continues to traffic in outrage discourse and polarization, I believe that televised sports pundit programs will remain firmly entrenched in the media landscape, encouraging viewers to come back for more outrage discourse at the "same time tomorrow, knuckleheads!"

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