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# *A Race against Racism: How black masculinity has changed over the last century in the NBA*

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## **Abstract**

The thesis investigates the intersection between society and racism in America during the 20-th century, focusing particularly on Black men's masculinity, physicality and their fights against prejudices. It analyzes how basketball emerged as a cultural phenomenon, tracing its historical origins and spread in urban African American communities, particularly in Philadelphia. The study explores the birth of the National Basketball Association (NBA), the role of American colleges and the importance of the Draft Night. It discusses how the perception of African American athletes has changed over the years, examining the contexts in which Black athletes in the early NBA franchises lived and the racism within the league. Profiles of influential players such as Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and LeBron James illustrate the contribution of African Americans to basketball and the fight against racism. Finally, the thesis evaluates the current situation of racism in American basketball and proposes future perspectives for the improvement of social and sporting conditions.

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the phenomenon of racism in American society considering its impact in the construction and representation of Black men's masculinity in the world of sports, and in particular basketball. Recovering from the colonial era and the recent slavery abolition, 20th-century American society was splitted and fractionated due to the current racial segregation, which enforced the separation, the rights restrictions and the confinement of African American citizens. Indeed, Black people were compelled to live apart from white Americans, which prevented the access to amenities and facilities such as accommodations, health care, education, work and public transport. In short, it severely restricted their rights as US citizens.

The first part of the first chapter aims to portray this society, permeated by a racial hate that still exists and permeates social life. Moving forward with the analysis, the attention is focused on how the perception of the masculinity of African American individuals has changed since the last century and throughout it. Promoters of this change have undoubtedly been the studies of various scholars who have sought to deconstruct racial prejudice and break down the racial barriers that had been erected up to that point. The change has not only occurred in a "passive" manner, through increased study and analysis of prevailing racial beliefs in the last century, but also thanks to the "active" role of minority communities: numerous clashes and rebellions erupted throughout North America in the 1960s (Harlem's Riot, Harlem Renaissance, Harry Edwards protest, Black Panthers). All of these movements resulted in a great unity of purpose and solidarity among the oppressed African American minority, even though the clashes caused the detentions and deaths of various individuals.

Sport was another element that played a crucial role in sustaining Black aspirations: starting from the second half of the last century, many sports heroes emerged who fueled the hopes and desires for voice and power of Black citizens. On the one hand, the initial successes confirmed the ideology that Blacks could excel only in sports, and they had more physical prowess than rational intelligence. At the same time, these victories represented a glimmer of light and hope for all those who had until then been in the dark and whose aspirations were repressed. A prominent role has been and still is played by the world of basketball. Born as a sport for whites, it soon became the most

popular and successful sport among young African Americans. The credit for this feat is partly due to the ease of access to this world: in fact, no special equipment is required to play basketball (just a ball and a hoop); furthermore, numerous street courts are erected in Black neighborhoods, housing projects and inner of major cities, allowing young people to train their skills, emulate their idols, and to some extent stay away from illicit and violent activities. Basketball thus emerged as a simple sport, initially composed of 13 rules, and from the early years of the last century, the first leagues began to form so that teams could compete against each other and establish which was the best. It was only after the conclusion of the Second World War (WWII) that the National Basketball Association (NBA) was established: basketball then became a real show, open to anyone who wished to participate. Starting from 1947, the draft lottery was introduced, allowing NBA teams to select young athletes who, by observing certain criteria, are considered eligible candidates to enter the League. Over the years, these criteria have changed, and thanks, or rather due, to the voracious development of social media, many athletes are followed from their early steps on a basketball court. A crucial role is certainly played by colleges and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), a non-profit organization that manages activities for athletes of various disciplines. In this way, many athletes become media stars from childhood, which obviously has psychological consequences on young people, who often, for a number of reasons, do not fulfill predetermined expectations. In addition, the Draft Night, which for many represents the summit of their sporting dreams, often matches with the peak of failure as young men find themselves placed into a completely different environment than what they had experienced up to that point.

Moving on to the third chapter, this work will first make a comparison between the past and present of the NBA, observing how the role of African American individuals within the League has changed: the purpose is to compare the number of Black athletes and coaches currently part of the association to how many were involved initially. This study also aims to consider the history of some athletes of African American origin and the challenges they have faced on and off the court. The first part will consider the first Black athletes to participate in the League, and then analyze some interesting case studies. The focus is on athletes such as Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and LeBron James who, aside from dominating the court far and wide, have been more or less actively

involved in protests and battles against racism, discrimination, and racial hatred. This section will also emphasize the differences in how these athletes have faced their battles, primarily due to different historical and socio-cultural contexts, but also related to the different ways these campaigns have been fought. Finally, reflection will be made on whether, there has been a change for the better in the perception of Black athletes and consequently whether this has affected African American men in American society. Many believe that the NBA values these individuals, as it allows them to showcase themselves, achieve fame and success, and secure million-dollar contracts; however, fans and spectators fail to consider that athletes are effectively slaves of their owners, namely the franchises and general managers (GMs) of these teams. Perhaps not much has changed from the colonial era and the era of the slave trade. What has changed is how this is perceived.



# 1. Analysis of society and racism in 20th-century America

## 1.1 Historical and social context of the United States in the 19th and 20th Centuries

American society at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was characterized by profound economic, social, and cultural changes, with a complex legacy of slavery, racism, and racial discrimination.

African slavery in the United States began in the 17th century with the arrival of the first slave ship in Jamestown colony, in Virginia, in 1619, and the legal institution of chattel slavery<sup>1</sup> in 1841 by the American colony of Massachusetts. Enslaved people were the personal property of their owners for life, they could be traded and sold at any time according to the will of their masters, and they were also used to build the British colonies and the new American state. Enslavers had full control, physically and sometimes even mentally, not only over the slaves but also over their offspring, and many of these individuals were born and died in chains. It is estimated that by 1860

[...] the nearly 4 million American slaves were worth some \$3.5 billion, making them the largest single financial asset in the entire U.S. economy, worth more than all manufacturing and railroads combined (James McPherson in Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2014).

The process towards achieving freedom began with the abolitionist movement in the North and culminated in the American Civil War (1861-1865). The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, signed by President Abraham Lincoln, declared the freedom of slaves in the rebellious states, and the subsequent ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 formally abolished slavery. However, the legal end of slavery did not immediately bring an end to discrimination and oppression for African Americans. After the Civil War, Reconstruction (1865-1877) attempted to integrate former slaves into American society by guaranteeing them civil and political rights. However, with the end of Reconstruction the South instituted Jim Crow laws<sup>2</sup>, which imposed racial segregation

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<sup>1</sup> The enslaving and owning of human beings and their offspring as property, able to be bought, sold, and forced to work without wages. Expression used to distinguish this captive form from other systems of forced, unpaid or low-waged labors also considered under the definition of “slavery” (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/chattel-slavery>)

<sup>2</sup> Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. Named after a minstrel show character, the laws—which existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968—were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence and death. (<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>)

in all aspects of public life, from transportation to education, to public facilities, for nearly a century.

The post slavery period saw an increase in lynchings and racial violence against African American, particularly in the South. White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan terrorized Black communities to maintain white supremacy and prevent the economic and political progress of African Americans. Black citizens' schools were attacked and vandalized, and individuals were targeted by white gangs with the intent to beat, torture, and lynch them. However, segregation and racial discrimination were not only relegated to the South. In the North and West as well, African Americans faced legal and de facto barriers in education, employment, and access to public services. Discriminatory practices in the housing sector, such as redlining<sup>3</sup>, limited the opportunities for Black families to own homes and accumulate wealth.

### *1.2 Perception of Black physique and masculinity in American society in the 1900s*

Historically, since the colonial era, African Americans "were defined as animals, as property to be owned by White men" (Ferber 2007, 14). This representation did not only concern the physical sphere of the slaves but also had a sexual connotation, to the point that a true fear of Black masculinity spread. According to sociologist Abby L. Ferber, "This narrative, which defines Black males as hypersexual, animalistic, and savage, is central to White American identity" (2007, 15).

During and following slavery, Black bodies indeed were often objectified and dehumanized. Numerous theories emerged in those years, for instance, the one proposed by the Frenchman Joseph de Gobineau, which only fed and promoted the racist and segregationist ideals, which the slave masters themselves supported indirectly. Men and women were compared to beasts that needed to be tamed and controlled; as a result, they were deprived of their rights and the ability to have control over their own bodies.

Among the copious prejudices that arose with the intent to discredit and humiliate African Americans, the most damaging concern was about the sexual aspect: Black

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<sup>3</sup> Redlining, illegal discriminatory practice in which a mortgage lender denies loans or an insurance provider restricts services to certain areas of a community, often because of the racial characteristics of the applicant's neighborhood.[...] The term redlining came about in reference to the use of red marks on maps that loan corporations would use to outline mixed-race or African American neighborhoods. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/redlining>)

people were often depicted as rapists. This stereotype, probably one of the most degrading, described Blacks as pathologically sick individuals, to the point that their masculinity and physicality were associated with the image of wild predators, evoking “[...] the pornographic view of the Black masculine body that had been established during slavery” (Richardson 2010, 36). This perception of Black masculinity was well represented by the film entitled “The Klansman”, directed by Terence Young. The movie highlights how lynching and abuse of violence, practiced to maintain purity in the southern regions and to preserve the safety of white women, were fueled by the fear and paranoia of being overwhelmed by the feasible rebellions of former slaves, victims of continuous abuse by their masters. Furthermore, it “[...] establishes a further bridge between the Civil War and Civil Rights eras, reminding us that this historical myth of Black masculinity had its origin in the postwar South” (Richardson 2010, 58). Nevertheless, this prejudice did not only refer to men, but had serious implications for the female sphere as well. Black women, indeed, were not exempt from abuses and violence enacted by whites, as they were also believed to be uncivilized and inferior. The prevailing idea was that they were impure, lascivious and above all sexually promiscuous, in fact attracting the sexual urges of men themselves. Unfortunately, even today this stereotype is alive and well ingrained in the minds of many American citizens. A number of recent events that occurred between the end of the last century and the beginning of the new millennium have recalled in the collective memory the myth of the “Black rapist”, demonstrating how this prejudice is still well entrenched in U.S. society. In contrast to this violent idea associated with the African American community, another stereotype that took hold and can be considered one of the most enduring ever, is the Sambo. Born in the early years of colonization, this prejudice depicts Blacks as a “[...] jolly, overgrown child” (<https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/links/essays/vcu.htm>), happy and eager to serve their masters. In addition, the Sambo would be biologically lazy and would always need the guidance of his owner before performing any action. While Blacks were therefore perceived as violent, impetuous and lack of eagerness justified the slavery and the deprivation of their freedom. In this way then, African Americans appeared as animals kept in cages, tame and lacking in animal instincts.

Preconceptions and clichés still exist in the USA and the South, which can be considered a world apart within the nation, held a primary role in creating a society based

on hierarchies and castes. In fact, in the literary context, the novel *Soldier's Pay* by William Faulkner addresses and analyzes this issue. The work was intended to create a parallel between military hierarchy and social order in the South. The most interesting aspect lies in the fact that Blacks do not play a prominent role, but rather, have only secondary appearances (maids, janitors, gardeners, etc.) consequently emphasizing the perception of their uselessness and inability in the society of the time. This narrative might obviously lead readers to think that African Americans essentially did not take part in World War I, the period in which the book is set. This does not represent reality since there were numerous Black men who took part and died during the conflict, convinced that by taking up arms and fighting for a country, that in fact denigrated them and tried to keep them away from white elitist society, they would be able to prove their strength, worth and obtain recognition of the basic rights due to any American citizen. Unfortunately, however this did not happen as Blacks were given marginal roles, so that the very few were able to rise in rank, but in any case, they did not have the opportunity to lead and command battalions of white men, as they were considered biologically inferior and incapable beings. Moreover, they were undesirable; they were considered deviant and abnormal. To better understand the segregation and oppression that these individuals had to endure, it is interesting to analyze a report entitled "Disposal of the Colored Drafted Men", written by Colonel E.D. Anderson. This document underlines the separation that was in place between Blacks and whites, pointing out how the former were considered stupid, physically unprepared, and most importantly, how they fell ill and died more frequently than their counterparts, thus emphasizing their weakness and the absence of masculinity in their bodies (Richardson 2010, 84).

As aforementioned, indeed, the South played a key role in generating social hierarchies to such an extent that Black Southerners were considered second-class Blacks by their own fellow Northerners, or rather did not represent the true essence of Black masculinity. In fact, African Americans in the North were the only members of their "race" who were accepted and could therefore aspire for social uplift. For this reason, factions and divisions were created within the Black community, The North was thus perceived as the hub of the true Black essence, while the South was regarded by some as a distant reminder of the ancestral home, the place from which everything originated but from which they need to move away. Black Southerners in fact were considered perverts

and their bodies were precisely associated with extreme sexual pathology. A rising example of how the Black body was denigrated is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, an experiment that was conducted on some unsuspecting men in exchange for small compensations (Richardson 2010, 88). The researchers infected the bodies of these men with syphilis, and the effects of this disease were studied and analyzed without the knowledge of those who participated. Many died, as the disease, in the most extreme cases, attacked the neurological and cardiovascular systems. Through this experiment, the myth of the Black rapist was further reinforced, as syphilis is generally contracted through close sexual contact. The experiment would not have been conceivable if the myth of the “Black rapist” and the conception of Black Southerners as biologically inferior had not been popularized. What is interesting and noteworthy is the fact that while in Europe syphilis was associated with prostitution and therefore predominantly with the female sphere, in America it was linked to male and Black individuals, who were therefore considered weak and ill. Once again, then, the Black body was associated with the Other, with what is pathologically sexual and extreme, diseased and perverse. This distinction would not seem to have disappeared, but rather, as Cathy Cohen argues, even in the modern era, attention and research for a cure regarding AIDS/HIV has focused only on white homosexuals, to the exclusion of all forms of community minorities. Therefore, despite the fact that nearly a century and a half has passed since the end of slavery, even today African Americans remain alienated and invisible, excluded in the society in which they live as if they were ghosts.

The South, therefore, although one might think of it as not central in the history of American society, has instead always played a pivotal role, especially reinforcing the ideology of white supremacy. Not surprisingly, even in the political sphere, although there were many Black individuals capable of holding important positions, because of their dialectic, their manner of dress, and their intellect, because they were from the South, they were considered inferior and unworthy of being leaders of the African American community. Malcolm X, for example, harshly criticized Martin Luther King’s politics in many of his speeches, calling him a “house Negro”, that is a Black man who did not represent the essence of the Black community as weak, inferior, and different, given his idea of nonviolence. Once again, therefore, Black masculinity was annihilated by one of its representatives, whose speeches re-evoked the myth of “Black southerner”. What

facilitated Malcolm X's success, in addition to his charisma and tenacity while he was speaking, was certainly his attire, especially his decision to wear elegant clothes, which made him an urban citizen, distant from the rural South regions. The fact that he associated his own figure with the urban context allowed him to become a model of updated and acceptable Black masculinity.

The city context, however, did not facilitate the African American community that had settled there. After the end of World War II (WWII), numerous Black citizens decided to leave the lands and regions of the South, which were basically anchored to the stereotype mentioned above and as a result an obtuse and bigoted mentality still prevailed, heading to the North, especially to the big cities. Obviously, their integration in these new societies and contexts in which they found themselves living was not facilitated in any way by the white elite, quite the opposite. Generally, Blacks had fewer opportunities, living gathered within their community and often in deprived areas of large metropolises which over the years only worsened the situation they found themselves living in. As a result, youngsters often committed crimes in an attempt to survive and find a way out. This certainly did nothing, but fueled others stereotypes and prejudices, once again associating Black masculinity with the concept of violence. Certainly, the rise of the rap genre, between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, reinforced these perceptions, to the point that Black guys started to be labeled "thugs". Blacks were regarded as criminals, involved in robberies, murders, drug dealing and abuses. However, many failed to grasp the message that these guys desired to share through their songs. On the one hand, young people were rapping about their experiences, talking about the street life and the hoods, unfortunately based on the excesses mentioned above and tied to the rough neighborhoods contexts in which they lived. On the other hand, rap music represented one of the few possibilities to escape for these youngsters, their chance to distance themselves from the stress and leave behind crimes and prejudices.

Another solution was the sports world. The origins of Black sporting activities can, in fact, be traced back to the period of slavery. Slave owners often allowed their slaves to spend their time engaging in sports, with the aim of granting them an illusory pleasure and distracting their minds from thoughts of escape and rebellion.

Despite the potential of sports to serve as a form of liberation during slavery and forced segregation, Black males were at the mercy of the Whites who controlled the sports industry (Griffin 2012, 163).

In this light, the appreciation of the masculinity and physicality of Black athletes should always be perceived and understood as merely serving the interest of whites. In fact, a Black person's success was simply a reaffirmation of his/her brutality, strength, and savagery, while at the same time, a defeat justified the need for white patriarchal control and violence. In any case, then, the perception of masculinity and physicality was always related to stereotypes that over the years ingrained in American minds and culture, which led people to justify the abuse of power and the inferiority of Blacks. Consequently, African Americans, excluded and alienated from any form of social contact, decided to create, and establish parallel sports leagues that would be free from the control of the society elite.

Among the various activities practiced, boxing and horse racing were the only ones that somehow legitimized the emergence of the first slave-athletes.

The first major Black athlete to successfully challenge the theory of Social Darwinism and the barriers of segregation was Jack Johnson when he defeated Tommy Burns, boxing's heavyweight champion, at Sydney, Australia in 1908 (Gilmore 1995, 8).

The following years marked what many considered the Golden Age of sports, with athletes like Babe Ruth, Bobby Jones, and others emerging. However, despite African Americans beginning to achieve early sport successes, it's important to note that

[...] the history of African Americans and sport is not a steady movement from exclusion to inclusion. Instead, enslaved and free African Americans competed with and against whites in the early 1800s and at the beginning of the 20th century, then were largely excluded from playing with and against white professionals (Brooks and Blackman 2011, 442).

For these reasons, the National Negro Baseball League was established in 1920, with teams coming from cities with large Black populations, such as St. Louis, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and others. "They began an annual World Series in 1924 and an annual All-Star game in 1933" (Gilmore 1995, 9). In the 1930s, Jesse Owens and Joe Louis became of the most captivating sports figures, to the point that, despite facing white athletes during the period of racial segregation, they won the admiration of white audiences. The results achieved by the track and field athlete Jesse Owens at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where he won four gold medals in front of the Führer Adolf Hitler, made him famous: from that moment on, Owens represented a symbol and an ideal of hope for all African Americans, victims of racism and segregation. Thanks to the outbreak of World War II (WWII), discussions and theories related to race had to be reassessed, so much so that a

month after the end of the conflict, Jackie Robinson was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers, one of the Major League Baseball (MLB) teams. In the following years, other franchises also began signing Black athletes, to the point that within a decade, the National Negro Baseball League lost its top players as well as the fan base, who began to follow the MLB with greater interest. By the 1950s, other sports leagues also broke down major racial barriers, particularly the newly formed National Basketball Association (NBA). Even major colleges began consistently recruiting Black athletes for their rosters, who, in most cases, helped the franchises achieve better results and gain greater prestige.

There is no doubt that the emergence of professional leagues and of Black athletes in the sporting environment have showcased their potential, allowing them to break down and detach themselves from the prejudices that have always affected the Black community. However, it should not be forgotten that these leagues were, and still are, run and controlled by whites. It seems clear then, that once again, Blacks played a secondary role, while whites were at the top, leaving no opportunities for African Americans to gain positions of control.

### *1.3 Resistance movements and struggles against racism in the United States*

During the past century, African Americans began to organize against discrimination and violence with the goal of having their rights recognized as humans, citizens, and not as animals or beasts. The event that preceded the Black Renaissance was the Harlem's Hellfighters parade in 1919. Before being deployed to Europe and fighting alongside the Allies, this regiment was denied the opportunity to march in the New York parade, "[...] known as the "Rainbow Division," because "black is not a color in the rainbow"." (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/remembering-harlem-hellfighters>). Upon arriving in France, since many Americans refused to fight alongside African Americans, the battalion was assigned to the French army. In fact, the Hellfighters were not well-regarded by either frontline soldiers or higher-ranking officers, as it was believed that Black soldiers were neither prepared nor suited to face European enemies. The Black soldiers were deeply humiliated and denigrated, having to not only confront the dangers of war but also to overcome and dismantle the prejudices of the time, proving themselves capable and equal. From the outset, however, the Hellfighters demonstrated their valor,



grit, and battlefield skills. Despite suffering significant losses, they never relinquished their positions or retreated from the front lines, showcasing their determination and courage. Upon returning home after the war, the veterans were finally able to march through the streets of their neighborhood and receive the well-deserved recognition owed to them. However, before their return, the American government sent a memorandum to the French government, urging them not to treat Black soldiers as equals to whites or to provide them with ideas and notions that, once back in America, they might study, analyze and use to demand recognition as full citizens rather than second-class individuals (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEuoA1leLU>). This event symbolically marked the beginning of the Black Renaissance, better known as the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and cultural movement that emerged in the Harlem neighborhood of New York in the 1920s, coinciding with the Golden Age of sports. Preceded by the Great Migration of African Americans citizens from the South to the urban centers of the North, this phenomenon allowed Black citizens to come together, thereby developing all possible forms of art and social expressions. In this way, Black people challenged the paternalistic and racist attitudes of whites, refusing to simply imitate the style of Europeans and white Americans, and instead asserting their freedom to express themselves in their own way, celebrating the Black culture that had emerged from slavery and their cultural ties with Africa. In the years that followed, the Harlem neighborhood would continue to play a central and primary role in African Americans movements, particularly in the 1960s. In 1964, the neighborhood was marked by the murder of 15-year-old African American James Powell, who was killed by a white police officer. This event sparked the Harlem Riot, a protest involving around 400 people that lasted for six consecutive nights: people fiercely attacked the NY police, destroyed some properties, and looted numerous stores<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> An estimated 144 people were injured, one person was killed, and a further 465 men and women were arrested over the course of the unrest. 541 shops were looted or damaged with costs estimated between \$1 million and \$2 million. Two months after the shooting, Gilligan was cleared of any wrongdoing by a grand jury. He maintained Powell had lunged at him with a knife. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem\\_riot\\_of\\_1964](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_riot_of_1964))

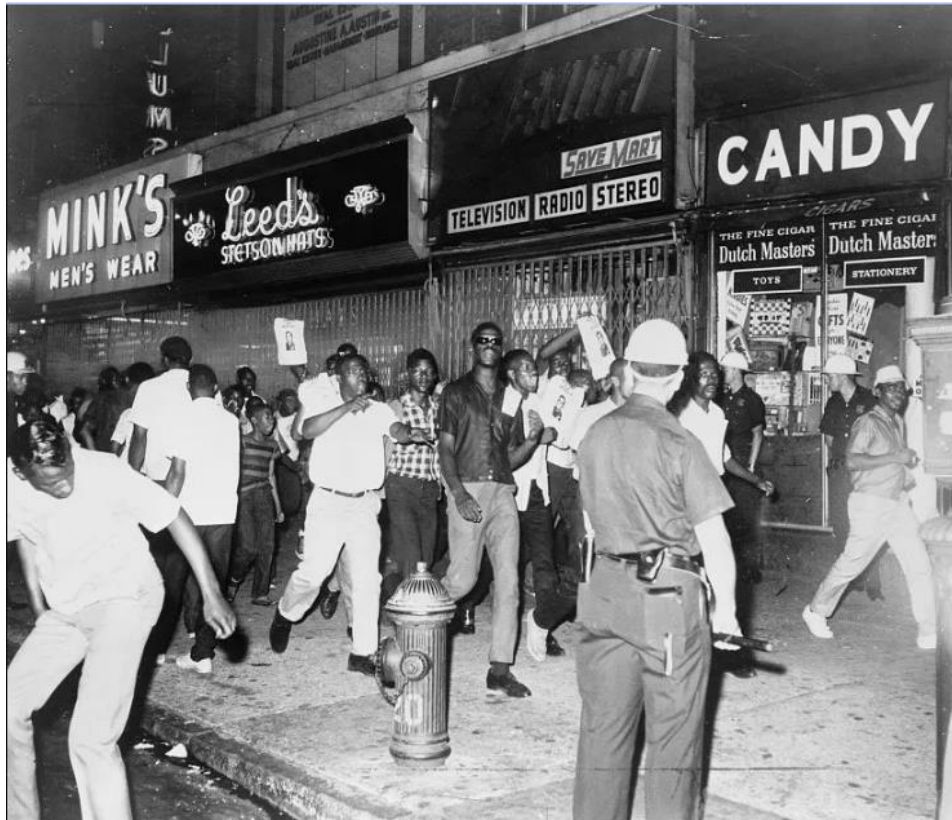


Figure 1 - Protesters walk through the streets of Harlem during a demonstration in 1964 (<https://cdn.britannica.com/63/247163-050-BDB532A2/Harlem-race-riot-1964-protestors.jpg>)

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, bringing to the forefront the charismatic figure of Martin Luther King Jr., who was supported in his struggle by several athletes, including Muhammad Ali (born Cassius Clay) and Bill Russell. One of the most emblematic episodes of African American protests was the case of Rosa Parks, who was arrested in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. Just a few hours after news of her arrest spread, movement leaders, including Luther King, organized a boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, resulting in dozens of buses sitting idle daily until the protest ended after 381 days. A few years later, on August 28, 1963, the famous March on Washington took place, with approximately 250,000 participants, led by King, who delivered his iconic “I have a dream” speech. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, declaring discrimination based on race, color, and sex illegal, thereby eliminating racial segregation in schools, public places, and workplaces. A year later, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, a law that prohibited racial discrimination in voting.

In 1967, sociologist and civil rights activist Harry Edwards organized the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) with the help of some African American athletes, aiming to address and combat racial discrimination in sports, particularly in the context of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City (I. S. Keino Miller, et al. 2018, 75).

The main goal of OPHR was to organize a boycott of the following year's global sporting event by Black American athletes. The organizers sought to use the international visibility of the Olympics to draw attention to racial discrimination in the United States and the world of sports. Although the boycott was not fully successful, the mere threat of it raised greater awareness of racial issues. The OPHR aimed to expose the racial segregation and discrimination that Black athletes faced, not only in sports but also in society at large. Black athletes often endured unfair treatment, received lower wages, and were denied the same opportunities as their white counterparts. One of the most memorable events associated with the OPHR was the protest gesture by Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the medal ceremony for the 200 meters at the 1968 Olympics. Both raised a black-gloved fist during the American national anthem, a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the civil rights movement and protests against racism. This act became an iconic symbol of the Civil Rights Movement and brought increased international attention to issues of racial discrimination in the United States. The legacy of the movement was reflected in the subsequent actions of athletes and activists who continued to fight against racial discrimination in sports and society.



## 2. The development of basketball as a cultural phenomenon

### 2.1 Historical origins of basketball and its spread in urban African American communities (Philadelphia)

Basketball was invented by James Naismith, a physical education professor, on December 1, 1891. Naismith was born on November 6, 1861, in Ontario, Canada. Subsequent to his studies about theology, he dedicated himself to teaching physical education (PE). In 1891, Naismith was a professor at International YMCA Training School of Springfield, Massachusetts, under the leadership of Dr. Luther Gulick, who was the head of the PE department. During the Winter of 1891, Gulick mandated Naismith in creating a game which could be played indoors, and which was suitable for all the students because they were restless and jaded by the existing physical activities. Gulick's will was to create a game that kept the students active and fit during the cold months, when outdoor sports were unfeasible. In designing this new sport, Naismith got inspired by a game from his childhood, named "Duck on a rock", which expected players to throw a stone with a parabolic trajectory and which was based on precision skills. On December 21, 1891, Naismith drew up a list of 13 simple rules that later have been posted on the gym's walls. The game was played by 18 students, splitted into two teams of nine each one. A leather soccer ball and two peach baskets hung on opposite balconies were used: the goal was to throw the ball into the opponent's basket to score points. The match ended 1-0. Subsequently, the 13 original rules were made official, definitely enshrining the birth of this sport.



Figure 2 - James Naismith holding a ball and a rudimentary basket (<https://www.focus.it/cultura/storia/james-naismith-basket>)

In the early stages, the number of players per team varied depending on the number of students joining and the size of the playing area. Beginning in 1894, teams started to consist of 5 players each if the playing field was smaller than 1,800 square feet, and the number of students could increase up to 7 members in larger areas. In the course of the 1890s, the game began to be introduced in European countries, primarily France and England but also in Japan and Australia. The first professional basketball league, the National Basketball League (NBL) was officially established in 1898. On the other hand, within five years of its inception, basketball was declared illegal by various associations because schools' gyms, intended for entire classes, were effectively monopolized by classes made up of only 10-18 students. Despite the banishment, many YMCA members gave up their memberships and decided to rent gyms on their own, thus fostering the development of professional teams and athletes.

Originally, players could wear three types of uniforms: knee-length football trousers, jersey tights as commonly worn by wrestlers, or short padded pants, forerunners of today's uniforms, plus knee guards. The courts were often irregular in shape, with obstacles such as pillars and stairways, but starting in 1903, it was regulated that all courts should have a clear, precise shape with well-defined borders. The first baskets used were completely different from those we are familiar with nowadays: initially a metal ring with a hammock-style basket was used, and to retrieve the ball after a skate was made, one had to use a ladder with the help of a pole and a chain. However, beginning in 1912-1913, nets with holes at the bottom were introduced, allowing the ball to fall on the ground and be easily retrieved by players and referees. It was also common for baskets to be attached to the stands, allowing fans to interfere with players' shots by easily swaying the net, thus favoring or disadvantaging different teams. For this reason, teams had to use glass backboards to protect the baskets and prevent fans from interfering with the shots. Glass backboards were first legalized by professional teams and later by collegiate teams in the 1910s. By 1894 the first basket-ball was patented and its final size was established in 1948-1949 with the introduction of the laceless molded ball.

The first collegiate game with teams composed of five players each was played between the University of Iowa and the University of Chicago, in Iowa City on January 18, 1896. The latter won, 15-12, with neither team using a substitute. Colleges established

their own rules committee in 1905, and by the dawn of 1912, there were at least five sets of rules: collegiate, YMCA, Amateurs Athletic Union, those used by state militia groups, and two varieties of professional rules

To establish some measure of uniformity, the colleges, Amateur Athletic Union, and YMCA formed the Joint Rules Committee in 1915. This group was renamed the National Basketball Committee (NBC) of the United States and Canada in 1936 and until 1979 served as the game's sole amateur rulemaking body. In that year, however, the colleges broke away to form their own rules committee, and during the same year the National Federation of State High School Associations likewise assumed the task of establishing separate playing rules for the high schools. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Rules Committee for men is a 12-member board representing all three NCAA divisions. It has jurisdiction over colleges, junior colleges, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and Armed Forces basketball. There is a similar body for women's play (<https://www.britannica.com/sports/history-of-basketball>)

Basketball quickly gained attention and interest from colleges across the United States, but a crucial role in the sport's spread was played by the outer neighborhoods of major urban centers, particularly the city of Philadelphia " [...] because of its long history of basketball, the number of legends who have hailed from there, and the levels and depth of social organization and competitive play" (Brooks 2011, 522). Professional basketball in Philadelphia began in 1902 with the creation of the Philadelphia Basketball League (PBL), to which Black citizens could only join starting in 1907. In 1909 the Eastern Basketball League (EBL) was founded, which included some teams from the PBL. Due to racial discrimination in the past, many athletes were unable to attend white universities from which they were excluded, but starting in the 1950s, local colleges began opening their doors to Black athletes. An informal association known as the Big Five was established, including the University of Pennsylvania, with the goal of integrating Black athletes into basketball. Teams from these colleges and universities won copious national championships and produced numerous international basketball talents: at least 50 professional athletes from Philadelphia have become pro-basketball players (notably Wilt Chamberlain, Rasheed Wallace, and Kobe Bryant). But why has the city of Philadelphia achieved such great success? First and foremost, it's important to consider that basketball is a very simple sport that does not require special equipment or infrastructure: all that people need is a ball and a hoop. Therefore, even in the poorest and most neglected areas, where financial resources were often limited, it was possible to find outdoor courts. Colleges and universities also played a crucial role in spreading interest in this sport. Many young African Americans were able to access education thanks to the numerous scholarships specifically established to attract them and provide opportunities for learning

and steering clear of criminal and shady circles. Today, the Philadelphia metropolitan area boasts over 30 collegiate campuses, and " [...] no other area, town, or city has this level of access to collegiate basketball" (Brooks 2011, 527). Young talents have the opportunity to showcase themselves annually, are often traded between colleges vying for top talent, and have the chance to train and study at the best colleges in the area thanks to numerous scholarships and merit awards. The rise of this city is also closely linked to the Great Migration. After the end of WWI and WWII, many African Americans left the South, heading to the North in search of new opportunities, aspiring for social mobility and an improvement in their conditions. In Philadelphia, as in other major cities, African American communities grew larger and more vibrant, and basketball fostered a sense of community and unity. As a team sport, basketball has always allowed young people to develop a strong sense of belonging and group identity. Additionally, in the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of hip-hop culture, strongly connected to the urban environment and the values of resilience, pride and defiance, found fertile ground in the basketball world, creating an unbreakable bond. Youngsters also grew up watching their idols on television, fueling their dreams and aspirations of emulation. Black athletes like Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, and Michael Jordan quickly became icons of success. These players demonstrated how this sport could be a way out of poverty, but at the same time, a path to social and financial recognition.

## *2.2 Birth of the NBA, the role of American colleges, and the Draft night*

The National Basketball Association (NBA) was officially founded on August 3, 1949, from the merger of the newly formed Basketball Association of America (BAA) established in 1946 by Walter A. Brown, owner of the Boston Garden, and the older National Basketball League (NBL). Brown recognized that the failure of the previous leagues stemmed from the fact that players were not bound to a single team by a fixed contract and that the game needed to focus more on entertainment and the skills of the professional athletes rather than their physicality and on-court confrontations. In 1976, the NBA further merged with the American basketball Association (ABA), adding 4 franchises to the existing ones, bringing the total number of teams to 30 (29 American and 1 Canadian). The regular season begins in October and ends in April, with each team playing 82 games. The teams are divided into two conferences, Eastern and Western, each



further divided into three different divisions (Atlantic, Central and Southeast for the Eastern Conference; Northwest, Pacific, and Southwest for the Western Conference), with each division consisting of 5 teams. At the end of the regular season, the top eight teams from every division, ranked by the number of victories achieved during the season, advance to the next stage of the annual tournament, the Playoffs. In the first round, the 1st seed in each conference faces the 8th seed, the 2nd faces the 7th, the 3rd faces the 6th, and the 4th faces the 5th. The winners of these series, which are decided in a best-of-seven format, progress to the second round (the Conference semifinals), and then to the NBA Conference Finals, which determine the champions of the two Conferences that will compete in the national championship finals (NBA Finals).

To help balance the gap between various franchises, the NBA has introduced an annual collegiate draft known as the NBA Draft, which allows each team to select and add a player who has declared himself eligible. Since 2005, the NBA has mandated that domestic players must be at least 19 years old and have been out of high school for at least one year to be selected by a team. This rule was implemented because, in the early 2000s, many players were declaring for the draft immediately after finishing their school career. The Draft Night generally takes place in the last week of June and is divided into two rounds, each one consisting of 30 picks. A few weeks prior to the Draft, a list of the 14 teams that missed the Playoffs is created, and these franchises have priority in the Draft through the Draft Lottery<sup>5</sup>. These clubs receive the first chance to select new players, providing teams struggling the most in the league with an opportunity to secure future talent. The order of selection for the remaining 16 teams, which participated in the postseason, is determined based on the win-loss record from the previous season, with the worst record picking first and the best record picking last. This means that the squad with the best regular season record will have the final pick. Typically, the most promising players are drafted in the early picks, but it is not uncommon for some players to be undervalued and later prove to be superstars, earning a place in the Hall of Fame by the end of their careers. To illustrate, Kobe Bryant, who won 5 NBA titles, was initially selected by the Charlotte Hornets with the 13th pick, only to be immediately traded to the

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<sup>5</sup> Fourteen numbered ping pong balls, numbered from 1 to 14, are placed in a machine similar to those used for lottery draws, from which four balls are randomly drawn to determine the winners. The order of the drawn numbers is not significant because they constitute a code assigned to a particular team. Since 2019, the three teams with the worst record have the same percentage chance of receiving the first overall draft pick (14%)

Los Angeles Lakers, where he would excel and make basketball history. Additionally, to prevent unbridgeable disparities, the NBA enforces a salary cap, a maximum limit that varies on an annual basis according to the league's revenue. This cap restricts how much a team can spend on player contracts, ensuring that even teams with smaller budgets are protected and preventing wealthier teams from acquiring all the top available players.

Basketball at the high school and college levels developed from a structured, rigid game in the early days to one that is often fast-paced and high-scoring. Individual skills improved markedly, and, although basketball continued to be regarded as the ultimate team game, individualistic, one-on-one performers came to be not only accepted but used as an effective means of winning games (<https://www.britannica.com/sports/history-of-basketball/U-S-professional-basketball>).

A primary factor that has undoubtedly facilitated the development and exponential growth of college basketball is television. Starting in 1963, NCAA games began to be broadcast live, and by the late 1980s, the major U.S. television networks started regularly airing games from the season, which runs from November to March. Thanks to agreements between the NCAA and various broadcasters, it is estimated that since 2003, the NCAA has earned at least \$545 million annually. The increase in interest and attention from viewers and fans has undoubtedly contributed to this success, but it has also fueled, often negatively, the desire and pressure for success, sometimes leading to violations of association rules. Over the years, a genuine craze for the colleges tournaments final phase has developed, to the extent that the term "March Madness" was coined to describe the period between March and April when college teams compete over three weekends for a chance to reach the final weekend of the month, known as the Final Four. At the end of this period, the NCAA tournament champion is declared.

### *2.3 Early Black athletes in NBA franchises and racism in the league*

Starting in the 1950s, just a few years after its founding, the NBA sought to integrate some Black athletes into its professional circuit, while simultaneously grappling with consumer loyalty issues and the need to generate profits to stay afloat. The spectacle that Black athletes could bring to the game was key to garnering popularity and interest in basketball among fans: Black players offered a fast, energetic style of play characterized by speed, explosiveness, and creativity.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, many athletes distinguished themselves through their achievements, despite competing in events predominantly dominated by white competitors. This did not go unnoticed by the academics and sociologists, who were already dedicating their studies to racial differences. Researchers sought to establish a racial hierarchy by examining factors such as bone size, skull shape, and facial features.

The upshot of the various investigations - even when the results did not withstand the testing methods of science - were that blacks were physically different from whites and possessed an accompanying character and temperament that was unique to their species (Wiggins 1989, 159).

The boxer Peter Jackson was one of the first athletes to be analyzed in terms of scientific principles, as it was believed that his athletic superiority stemmed from a natural predisposition to be a born fighter to the extent that he was described as a “[...] 'human fighting animal,' a personification of pre-civilized days when African men had to survive on strength alone” (Wiggins 1989, 159). Throughout the twentieth century, these theories persisted, but during the first two decades of the 1900s, less attention was given to African American athletes as they were systematically excluded from white athletic organizations and relegated to competing among themselves in their own leagues. The racial debate returned to the forefront of public opinion only in the 1930s, when Jesse Owens began to achieve his first Olympic successes.

Yale track coach, Albert McGall, suggested that maybe black sprinters got better leverage - and a little advantage over white sprinters - because of the projecting heel bone that was frequently found among blacks. Dean Cromwell, the well-known University of Southern California and Olympic track coach, felt that blacks excelled as sprinters and jumpers because they were closer to the primitive than white men. (Wiggins 1989, 161)

These statements did not go unnoticed and captured the interest of William Montague Cobb, who rejected the idea that athletic success simply depended on racial characteristics. He argued that the success of African Americans, as well as white athletes, was not due to any peculiar racial traits but rather to intense training, methodical preparation, and the success of emulating and surpassing predecessors in a particular discipline. Clinical psychiatrist Laynard Holloman, on the other hand, suggested that the success of Black athletes was driven by a desire for revenge against whites. From his perspective, the supremacy of Black people in boxing stemmed from the fact that they harbored a century-old, repressed hatred, which was manifested as a form of savageness when facing white opponents, rather than fellow Black competitors. Additionally,

according to Holloman, the pursuit of excellence in sports served the Black community “[...] to compensate for their feelings of inferiority.” (Wiggins 1989, 163). Many of these reflections and discussions focused on the achievements of professional boxers, but the Harlem Globetrotters also drew attention to the topic. Founded by Abe Saperstein in 1927, this famous all-Black basketball team was noted for perpetuating the Black Sambo stereotype.

Running about the court emitting shrill jungle sounds and shouting in thick southern accents, the Globetrotters style of play reflected all the prejudices that the dominant culture had built up about blacks in this country. The Globetrotters had innate physical skills, exhibited "natural rhythm," but were in need of "mature white handling" (Wiggins 1989, 165).

For these reasons, Black individuals were admitted into the NBA but only in the role of athletes; they were not allowed to hold managerial positions, coaching roles, or ownership of a team. It wasn't until the 1960s that a Black person held a leadership role within the NBA: Bill Russell was appointed head coach of the Boston Celtics in 1966, Ken Hudson became the first Black referee starting in 1968, and Wayne Embry was named general manager of the Milwaukee Bucks in 1972, the first Black man to hold such a role. The first Black owner of an NBA franchise was not seen until the 2000-2001 season when Robert Johnson became the majority owner of the Charlotte Bobcats.

The first African American athlete to play in an NBA game was Earl Frank Lloyd (1928-2015) during the 1950-51 season. He played only 7 games before his team, the Washington Capitols, folded in January 1951. He was later drafted by the Syracuse Nationals after serving the U.S. Navy, and his nickname was “Black Cat”. During the same season, three other players took part at least in one match in the League, including Charles Henry Cooper. Known as Chuck Cooper, he was the first Black player to be drafted in 1950 by the Boston Celtics, coached by Red Auerbach, who would later hand over his coaching role to Bill Russell. Nathaniel Clifton, also known as Nat or by his nickname Sweetwater, was the first Black player to sign a contract to play in the NBA with the New York Knicks. These athletes faced significant issues related to racism. They experienced discrimination both on and off the court. In some Southern U.S. cities, e.g. they were not allowed to stay in the same hotels or eat in the same restaurants as their white teammates. Additionally, they were often subjected to racist insults from the public and received discriminatory treatment from the media, which tended to downplay their performances and highlight any mistakes. The psychological pressure was intense, as they

knew they represented the Black community and had to constantly prove they deserved their place in a predominantly white League. These athletes knew, in fact, that if they achieved success, they would have become role models for young people to look up in the future. Members of America's Black community were aware that the chances for a Black athlete to succeed in sport were very slim, and as a result, "[...] the success of individual Black athletes could possibly quicken the advancement of the whole race" (Wiggins 1989, 174). Young people therefore sought to emulate their successful predecessors, hoping for a better future. Given that many fields were closed off to their community, only sports and entertainment were "easily" accessible. Nevertheless, African Americans were conscious that athletic achievements would not, in any case, eliminate the race issue, since "[...] political and economic dominance still remained in white hands" (Wiggins 1989, 175). However, this community held onto the hope that by emerging and succeeding, more attention would be drawn to their situation, making everyone aware of the conditions in which Black people had to live.



### **3. Analysis of African American players in Basketball and the current situation of racism**

#### *3.1 Profile of some of the most influential African American players in basketball history (Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, LeBron James)*

Since their entry in the League, Black athletes have consistently faced issues related to racism, either actively or passively. Many, due to the psychological pressure and fear, chose to remain silent and submit to the hatred perpetuated by supremacists and racists. Others, determined to change the situation, decided to confront these issues openly. One such figure was William Felton Russell, better known as Bill Russell. Born in Monroe, Louisiana, in 1934, he grew up in the segregated South, where Black citizens had no rights, could only go to designated places, and were effectively considered second-class citizens. His father had experienced slavery, and his ancestors had worked on American plantations. When he was nine years old, his family moved to California as part of the Great Migration of Black citizens after World War II, and his life changed dramatically. While in Louisiana, he could not freely access the library, but in California, he could visit it almost daily, allowing him to study, cultivate his intellect and mature. In 1946, at the age of 12, his mother passed away, and his father began taking care of his children, contrary to the tradition at the time where aunts would adopt the children if a mother died. In the 1950s, the Celtics were looking for a player who could excel in defense across the court, and in 1956, Russell was drafted as the second overall pick. However, an unwritten rule in the NBA at the time limited each team to having at most one Black player. This rule was later modified, allowing the Boston Celtics and the other franchises that perhaps already had a Black player on their roster, to sign more African Americans, so these athletes, being Black, could share a room, eat together since, due to segregation, they had to remain separate from their white teammates. After signing his first professional contract, Russell bought a house in the Reading neighborhood, finding himself in a strongly conservative area. Despite several complaints to the police about his neighbors, no action was ever taken: according to Bill, Boston was the most racist city in the NBA. Journalists also did not appreciate his role on the team, they criticized his physical attributes, and frequently condemned him. In 1961, during a Summer tour, the Celtics played against the Hawks in the South, where segregation was still prevalent. Due to ongoing boos and insults, the four Black players on the Boston team left the court, and

Bill stated that he would do it again if faced with the same situation. Russell felt the weight of the entire Black community, as he was one of the first African Americans in the League, but by the 1960s, the situation began to improve gradually. In 1963, Bill Russell Day was declared in Reading, where he lived with his family, and for the first time, he felt welcomed in the city and wanted to buy a larger house. However, things did not go as planned, as neighbors were unhappy about having a famous Black athlete as a nearby resident. Russell did not want anyone to dictate where and how he should live; he wanted to be free and fight against racism and prejudice. In 1963, the Civil Rights Movement was also born, and the Hall of Famer participated, leading a protest march. A few months later, Martin Luther King marched on Washington. Bill was invited to speak on stage but refused, choosing to stay in the front row as he felt he had not achieved anything extraordinary. A year later, he went to Jackson, Mississippi, where racism was rampant, and bloodshed was frequent. Russell wanted to dismantle the racist society of the time but realized that uprooting a centuries-old root in a few years was impossible, leading to a deep frustration as he questioned whether basketball could aid his struggle, seeing no results. In 1966-67, Red Auerbach coached the Celtics for one last season before Russell succeeded him, becoming the first Black head coach, and player, in history. In his second season as a coach, he faced copious battles on and off the court. He opposed the Vietnam War, viewing it as a relic of colonialism, and supported Muhammad Ali, a strong opponent of American war policy, risking the end of his career, loss of his title, and imprisonment. At the Cleveland Summit, Black athletes publicly supported Ali's stance against mandatory military service. In 1968, after Martin Luther King's assassination, riots broke out, and anger spread rapidly. Bill Russell and his fierce rival Wilt Chamberlain requested permission not to play in the NBA game, but the arena was sold out, and the match proceeded. The Black communities were worried, fearing that with King's death, his ideas had also perished. Bill decided to retire, feeling no longer motivated, as basketball no longer interested him, and moved to Los Angeles to adopt a different way of living, focusing on television (talk shows, acting, commercials). In 1972, Boston retired his jersey, and he refused a public ceremony and the NBA Hall of Fame honor, believing it to be racist. At the end of the 1990s, a ceremony was held to celebrate his achievements at the Boston Garden Arena, and for the first time, he reopened communication with fans and opponents. In 2011, he was awarded the Presidential Medal



of Freedom by President Barack Obama, recognizing his role and activism throughout his professional career.

A second player who made a significant impact in the NBA world with his fight against racism and issues related to religion, as he converted to Islam, was Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor Jr., better known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Born in Harlem, New York, his family relocated to Upper Manhattan in 1950. His father was a rare figure at that time as a railroad police officer, while his mother was a simple clerk. Throughout adolescence, he spent a lot of time alone, immersing himself in books, a passion that would define both his career and life. At just 17, he worked as a journalist and participated in the Summer initiative called Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU), which aimed to combat poverty in Harlem by helping young African descendants become better educated and gain easier access to the job market. During this time, he also met Martin Luther King, a figure who would influence and shape his life path. He later took part in the Cleveland Summit, organized to support Muhammad Ali in his opposition to the Vietnam War, and in 1968 decided not to participate in the Olympic Games as representative of the United States, stating that he wanted to protest against the racial prejudices, injustices and oppression faced by African Americans. Despite being a superstar in college basketball, he was aware that on the streets, he was just another Black young man, vulnerable to racial abuse due to his skin tone. In 1968 sociologist Harry Edwards organized a boycott movement for the Olympics to be held that same year.

By Christmas, Alcindor was calling the boycott “a dead issue.” Sports Illustrated had reported his support for the protest, and conservative editorials characterized him as a misguided activist. Hate mail called him a traitor or an “uppity nigger.” He wanted no part of that backlash. “Everyone seems to think it was my boycott,” he complained. “I just attended some meeting. I was not the leader and no one has contacted me about any future meetings.” He never again associated with the boycott movement, which lost momentum as most black athletes chose to test themselves at the Games. (Goudsouzian 2016, 441)

He decided to enroll at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) because the State of California was renowned for its colorblind freedom. However, he was not fully satisfied, and his interest in the Islamic world grew increasingly stronger. In 1967, he won the NCAA title, and a few days later

“[...] amateur basketball’s governing body banned the dunk. Some called it the “Alcindor rule.” [...] The dunk was most associated with black players, and Alcindor, among others, accused the rulemakers of racial prejudice” (Goudsouzian 2016, 446).

During his college years, he amassed victory after victory, consistently being the most dominant player on the court. However, he increasingly felt a growing dualism within himself: on one side he was Lewis Alcindor, the athlete everyone knew, and on the other hand was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. His entry into the professional world did not alleviate his internal division; instead, it significantly amplified it. “Because he seemed alienated, sullen, and solitary, he served as the villain in a media-driven storyline informed by popular prejudices about race, religion, and basketball’s great giants.” (Goudsouzian 2016, 438). To the public, who booed him at every game, he appeared rude, distrustful, avoided interactions with fans, and shunned interviews and autographs. Despite this demeanor, he gained supporters both within and outside the basketball world: for many, he was a symbol of pride, resistance against prejudice, and independence. In 1971, he publicly announced his conversion to Islam and expressed his desire to be called Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. This naturally evoked both disdain and admiration, but Alcindor accepted that it would take time for people to understand him, since he, first and foremost, struggled to understand and listen to himself. The announcement came via a press conference before the athlete and his team departed for a tour in Africa: he described this experience as a return to his roots. A few years later, Abdul-Jabbar decided to request a trade and leave the Milwaukee Bucks, feeling saturated and weary of the current situation. The Lakers decided to sign him, but the situation seemed to worsen as fans and journalists turned against him due to his failure to win a title since 1971 and his declining statistics. Moreover, blinded by anger he broke his hand punching a basket stanchion. The NBA fined him, but he states he would not apologize and did not regret his actions. Consequently, Kareem was once again seen as the villain of the League. However, in the 1980s, a new chapter of his life began: he started a relationship with a white woman that helped him step out of his isolated world. The Lakers added the talent of Earvin “Magic” Johnson to their roster, and Abdul-Jabbar started to take part

“[...] in movies, filmed commercials, and wrote a popular memoir. And as he grew comfortable with a more public presence, he shaped and reflected the place of orthodox Islam in American culture” (Goudsouzian 2016, 469).

He embarked on a new chapter of his life, becoming a public intellectual. Following the September 11 attacks, “[...] he has not only urged Americans to recognize distinctions between terrorists and the majority of the Muslim world, but also advocated tolerance

across lines of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity” (Goudsouzian 2016, 470). In 2016, President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor for a U.S. citizen. In 2021, the NBA dedicated the Social Justice Champion Award to him, an accolade given to the player who demonstrates the greatest commitment to social justice.



Figure 3: The 1967 meeting of African American athletes featuring, front row left to right, Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown and Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar). Photograph: Bettmann/Bettmann Archive (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/oct/23/colin-kaepernick-muhammad-ali-summit-sports-activism>)

Currently, the world of sports is still permeated by racism, and several athletes have aligned themselves with protest movements, becoming advocates for these causes. One athlete who is well-known and acclaimed for his on-court achievements but also for his social and civic engagement is LeBron Raymone James Sr. Born in Akron, Ohio, on December 30, 1984, James was raised by his mother alone, who was only 16 at the time, in one of America’s most notorious neighborhoods. The absence of the father from his life became a constant motivation for him to improve both on and off the court. During his adolescence, he attended Saint Vincent- Saint Mary High School, where he quickly distinguished himself with his basketball and football skills. He was recognized as Mr. Basketball for Ohio, and the entire nation began to follow his exploits, leading to the acclaimed magazine Sports Illustrated featuring his photo on its cover in February 2022

with the iconic title “The Chosen One”, nickname that would stick with him. In the same year, he wanted to enter the Draft but could not due to existing regulations, so he had to wait the following year, when fortune smiled upon the Ohio NBA team, the Cleveland Cavaliers, who had the first overall pick in the Draft. From 2004 to 2010, he sought to lead the team to positive results and began to win his first personal awards: Rookie of the Year, All-Star Game MVP, and so forth; he was also the youngest ever to score at least 40 points in a game, to record a triple-double<sup>6</sup>, and lead the Cavaliers to the Finals in the 2006-2007 season, although they lost the series 4-0. In the 2008-2009 season, he was named the Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the Regular Season, but despite this, he could not win the title, losing the Finals to the Orlando Magic. The year 2010 marked a turning point in LeBron’s career. As a free agent<sup>7</sup>, he decided to leave his “home” and embark on a new adventure in Miami. This decision was announced through a special broadcast by ESPN, and it was named “The Decision”. Because of this decision, many of his supporters turned against him, essentially labeling him a traitor, as everyone considered him the “son of the city”, having grown up in the surrounding area. During his time in Florida, James continued to enlarge his personal palmarès, winning numerous individual titles, including the NBA Finals MVP; he won his first title in the 2011-2012 season and repeated the feat the following year, solidifying his status among the greatest players of all time. In January 2013, he also became the youngest player to reach 20,000 points and 5,000 assists. Despite his success, LeBron took the decision to return to his home state in 2014, with the goal of winning at least one title with “his” team, which he achieved in the 2015-2016 season, overcoming the Golden State Warriors, who were leading 3-1 the series. In the following years, he consistently led the Cavaliers to the Finals but could not replicate his previous achievement. In 2018, he left Cleveland again and signed with the Los Angeles Lakers. His first year was less than stellar; the teams struggled and did not qualify for the Playoffs. Subsequently, new players have been added to the roster, the franchise’s record improved, allowing LeBron to qualify to the Playoffs and to win a title, his fourth, by defeating the Miami Heat. In March 2022 he became the first player to record 30,000 points, 10,000 rebounds, and 10,000 assist and in February 2023 he surpassed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s all-time points record, and in March 2024, he reached 40,000 career

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<sup>6</sup> A triple-double is defined when a player records at least 10 points, 10 assists, and 10 rebounds in a single game.

<sup>7</sup> The status of a player who is without a contract with any team and can therefore sign with any franchise.

points. Outside the court, LeBron was the first Black man to appear on the cover of Vogue in 2008. That same year, he gathered around 20,000 people to watch a short film parsing the future President Barack Obama. James also supports many charitable organizations and has founded his own, the LeBron James Family Foundation, based in Akron. In July 2018, he opened the “I Promise School”, an institution aiming to provide free education to children from unprivileged backgrounds. Given his global recognition, LeBron can be considered the prototype of the modern activist athlete. Through his social media channels, especially Twitter, he has often highlighted political and social issues that might otherwise have been overlooked.

On March 2012, James and his Miami colleagues posed for a photo wearing hooded sweatshirts, a tribute to the hoodie Florida teenager Trayvon Martin was wearing when he was shot and killed by George Zimmerman the previous month. James later posted the photo on social media alongside the hashtag #wearetrayvonmartin. In 2014, James spoke out again, this time against Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling after Sterling was caught on tape making a series of racist remarks. James said that the Sterling family did not belong in the league. (Galily 2019, 3)

In 2014 he responded to President Obama’s request by wearing the “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirt to honor the legacies of Muhammad Ali and Bill Russell. Between 2015 and 2016, he tweeted his frustration after copious African American men were unjustly killed by the police. During the 2016-17 season he expressed his solidarity with the US national anthem protest. Furthermore, in 2017, “he attacked American President Donald Trump numerous times” (Galily 2019, 1-2). Given his activism, LeBron is considered not only as an athlete but also as an astute businessman and entrepreneur. However, he has faced criticism as well. Many of his followers were disappointed when James did not publicly comment on the death of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old African American who was killed in Cleveland. LeBron stated he did not want to speak because he was not well-informed about the incident. Moreover, LeBron’s activism has always been characterized by a rejection of violence, favoring instead vibrant protest based on words, images, and gestures. Although the Akron athlete is outspoken on social media, leveraging his significant brand, fame, and fan support, it’s important to remember that he is primarily an athlete, not a politician, or an activist. Nonetheless, many—both professionals and non-professionals—acknowledge his significant role as an activist, believing that his passion, drive, and desire to express himself elevate him to a higher level of activism.

### *3.2 Perception of African American athletes: Has there been a change from the past?*

Despite many considering the world of sports as a place of equity and tolerance, within basketball, focusing on the NBA and NCAA, there are still experiences of racism, tensions, and frictions. As previously mentioned, during the slavery era, Black people were considered as literal beasts, and this perception persisted in the sports world as well. The fact that African American were given the opportunity to enter the NBA starting in the 1950s should be viewed in this context. Whites, who effectively ruled the League uncontested, exploited the talent, energy, and unique playing style of Black players to their advantage, to satisfy their own entertainment, while effectively enslaving these athletes. Analyzing some statistical data, it is possible to see that over the years, the situation has improved on one hand but still progresses slowly and with limited results. In the 2006-2007 season, only one out of the 30 team owners in the League was Black, 12 coaches were Black, and top administrative positions were held by 377 whites compared to 63 Black individuals. By contrast, 75% of the players were African Americans while 21% were white. These figures show that although superficially the League might appear to have a “Black face”, this mask only hides the fact that the NBA is dominated and managed by whites (Griffin 2012, 165). The higher-ups not only manage and control the images through which the Association is perceived but also define and limit the boundaries within which players can operate. An example that highlights the racism still present in the most renowned professional basketball League is the famous brawl between the Detroit Pistons and the Indiana Pacers in 2004, known as “Malice at the Palace.” During the game, a violent altercation broke out on the court when Ron Artest, an Indiana player, committed a foul on the opponent player Rasheed Wallace. Artest walked away to calm the situation and lay down on the scorer’s table when he was hit by a beer thrown by a fan from the stands. Artest lost his temper, leading to a furious brawl between the players, all of whom were Black, and several fans, mostly white. In the following day, the news spread throughout America, and the players involved defended each other, feeling violated and defenseless in their pride, honor, and protection. However, the League’s officials never openly defended the athletes; instead, they condemned their actions (some were suspended for numerous games, others fined), sparking the players’ anger as they felt defenseless and betrayed. Additionally, to prevent similar incidents in the future, former NBA Commissioner David Stern proposed

changing the Draft rules to require players to be at least 20 years old to be eligible. This news was poorly received by both players and critics. Stern's words, though implicit, conveyed a deeply racist message. By applying this rule, future players of the League, the majority of whom were African American, would supposedly receive a better education, having the opportunity to be guided by white professors and trainers. They would also have the chance to mature more and better develop their physiques. It is clear that, in the former executive's view, Black youths were seen as undisciplined and unprepared, both physically and mentally, and that the NBA's primary interest was focused on their physical attributes. These words reinforced the stereotypes that had previously been associated with Black citizens, particularly the image of the Sambo. From Stern's perspective, these guys are considered as foolish children that should be guided and controlled by their white "masters".

The White power structure of the league has been able to promote the NBA as a colorblind and progressive organization, exploit a highly profitable Black male image, and mask the omnipresent power of Whiteness—all the while maintaining Whiteness as the normative status quo (Griffin 2012, 175)

Another incident that shed lights on the racism present in the NBA occurred in 2005, when "'NBA executives and owners instituted a mandatory dress code as a racializing tactic that was intended to further demonize and control players and Blackness by rendering hip-hop culture both criminal and unprofessional" (García 2018, 105)." The decision was made in response to the arrival of Allen Iverson, nicknamed "The Answer", in the League starting in 1996. On Draft night, Iverson had presented himself in a suit and followed the NBA dress code guidelines, effectively concealing his past of living on the streets. However, in the following years, Allen began to cover his body with tattoos (famously, the "FAME" tattoo, an acronym that stand for "Fuck All My Enemies") and embraced hip-hop culture through his clothing and hairstyles. These behaviors were not well received or accepted by the white NBA executives, who perceived hip-hop aesthetics, like the Black body, as signifying "[...] violence, immorality, and 'thuggery'" (García 2018, 112). As a result, in 2005, a rule was introduced to regulate players' dress code, requiring them to wear jackets at the arenas and banning T-shirts, hats, hoodies, flashy jewelry, and similar items. African American players immediately felt targeted, viewing the rule as an attempt to suppress their opportunity to freely express and to censor their identities. In response, athletes chose to subvert the dress code in their own way, for

instance by pairing suits with baggy pants or wearing flashy rings in place of necklaces and pendants. Over the time, players managed to undermine the rule, and although it has not been abolished, many athletes now enter in the arenas dressed as they prefer and want.



Figure 4 - Allen Iverson playing cards, wearing attire associated with hip-hop culture and the streets (hat, durag, earrings, and visible necklaces) ([https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Iverson\\_cards\\_1.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Iverson_cards_1.jpg))

Racist attitudes and ideologies are not confined to the highest professional League but are deeply rooted and visible even in lower-level competitions, such as the NCAA. Student-athletes are not compensated for their efforts, and despite this, thanks to various television contracts, these efforts generate billions of dollars annually for the associations's executives, as it is a continually growing and expanding business. Brandi Collins-Dexter has stated that her father, a former basketball player, lived in poverty during his college years, struggling to make ends meet. Today, the situation remains largely unchanged, as many athletes are African descendants, coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, and must find jobs to survive hunger and poverty. Furthermore, NCAA executives staunchly defend this situation by referring to the American Constitution, particularly the 13th Amendment, which allows the association to treat young student-



athletes as if they were slaves. What is disheartening and often overlooked is that only 2% of athletes eventually become professionals, and African American athletes “[...] are significantly less likely to graduate with a degree” (Collins-Dexter, 2018). The primary interest of these organizations, in fact, still remains to offer entertaining shows to the fans, exploiting to the fullest the image, physicality, and skills that young athletes can provide for the sole personal gain of the white-led leadership. This is done without considering how to ensure a stable future for the athletes, one that allows them to permanently move away from the difficult situations from which most of them come.

It is evident that, despite the apparent progress and the image of equality and inclusivity that the NBA and the NCAA strive to project, racism and entrenched power dynamics continue to deeply influence the world of basketball. The stories and episodes examined show how white power structures have historically taken advantage and continue to exploit the talent and image of African Americans, while maintaining strict control over their modes of expression and participation. These dynamics reveal a dichotomy between the visibility and cultural influence of African American athletes and the reality of their limited decision-making power within the leagues and administrative structures. The tension between the League’s apparent progressivism and its discriminatory practices demonstrates that racism, though more subtle than in the past, continues to pervade the system. Indeed, there are many players who still claim to have experienced racial treatments from individuals who call themselves basketball fans. The Boston Celtics forward, Jaylen Brown, stated that the city of Boston is much more racist than it appears, thus recalling the experience previously endured by Bill Russell in his youth. What is surprising and at the same time disappointing is the fact that acts of racism have also occurred in other big cities, such as Denver, Salt Lake City, and Portland (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/apr/25/boston-racism-sports-denver-portland-salt-lake-city>). This is a symptom that, even today, being a Black citizen entails daily challenges and struggles, demonstrating that discrimination is still an open wound in the U.S. nationalistic sentiments. Furthermore, words of regret and disappointment have also been expressed by white players, who have experienced similar episodes indirectly. Kyle Korver, a former professional basketball player who spent several years in the NBA, has openly admitted to having lived in a privileged context as a white person. Referring to a number of events involving his former Black teammates, as well as opponent players,

Korver stated that he was disgusted and horrified, asserting that white people are not guilty of the crimes committed by their predecessors, but are indeed responsible for what has been passed down to them (<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/08/sport/kyle-korver-white-privilege/index.html>). Despite the efforts of many African American athletes, such as those mentioned above, to break down and confront the stereotypes burdening their community, it is not uncommon to find some athletes making foolish mistakes, thereby undermining the work accomplished by their peers. Recently, for example, Memphis Grizzlies star Ja Morant filmed himself during an Instagram live holding a gun inside a stripclub. This incident immediately sparked numerous controversies, as Morant is a very young talent with significant influence over young generations. Many believe that in the future he could dominate the League based on his performance thus far. Following this event, the NBA suspended the player for several games, as did the Grizzlies organization, Morant admitted his fault and acknowledged the seriousness of the situation, promising to change, with the support of external figures. However, a few months later, the young star again filmed himself holding a gun while hanging out with friends. The League suspended him once more, urging him to reflect on his repeat offense and the gravity of his actions. Unsurprisingly, this news caused a major stir among basketball fans, and this criminal behavior only reignited the stereotype that links Black people to crime, thuggery, and violence. However, it is essential to remember that one cannot generalize, and therefore the events involving Morant should not have repercussions on the entire Black community. It is, in fact, the reckless act of a young man barely in his twenties, who has thrust into the world of basketball under the gaze of millions and was unable and immature in managing his private and public life. This, however, does not and should not justify the racist attitudes still present in the NBA and in the world of basketball in general.

An event that deeply shook the NBA players, as well as the emotions of all citizens of the African American community, was the killing of George Floyd in 2020, given the racist nature of how it occurred. The incident immediately garnered national, but especially international, media attention, given the brutality with which the murder was committed. The video of the crime quickly spread across the web, prompting people to take the streets, organize demonstrations to protest, and demand justice, equity, and systemic reforms. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) hashtag was widely shared on social

media, and copious celebrities stood at the forefront in support of this movement. Most notably, numerous NBA players used their platforms images and videos of themselves during the protests through their channels. The African American community felt wounded and vulnerable once again, and even though these professionals live in more privileged conditions than most of their fellow citizens, they became aware that any Black person could have been in George's place. For this reason, in agreement with the League head offices, during the 2020 Playoffs, played behind closed doors in the famous "Orlando bubble", the players took the court wearing jerseys that did not display their names on the back, but instead featured activist slogans such as "Justice Now", "See Us", "Respect Us", etc. It was not the first time that the NBA had taken a public stance on racial justice, but it should be noted that, even today, little to nothing has changed, as corporate leadership is still predominantly composed of white men, while Black people are continually exploited for their technical skills and the entertainment they provide and are limited to just that.

The contrast among the high percentage of Black players and the overwhelming majority of white executives not only highlights a lack of representation in positions of power but also perpetuates a structure that marginalizes and controls African Americans. Incidents like "Malice at the Palace" or the introductions of a specific dress code in 2005 are glaring examples of how the League has sought to contain and limit African American expression and culture, often linking Black identity to concepts of violence, savagery, and deviance. Similarly, the NCAA's situation demonstrates that the roots of the problem extend beyond the NBA to lower levels of basketball, where African American athletes continue to be exploited in the name of profit.



## **Conclusion**

To conclude this thesis, it is essential to thoroughly examine the central role that basketball has played in the history of the African American community, not just as a sport but as a catalyst for profound cultural and social change. This analysis fits into a broader context that includes the long-standing struggle against racism and discrimination, a struggle in which African Americans have used various arenas, including sports, to assert their identity and their rights.

Basketball has offered the Black community a way out of the oppressive conditions of daily life, serving as a platform for visibility and redemption. In the early decades of the 20th century, while racial segregation was the norm in the United States, the sport became one of the few spaces where African Americans could excel and gain recognition. This not only improved their economic situation but also allowed them to challenge racial stereotypes, demonstrating abilities, intelligence, and leadership that were often denied to them in other areas of social life. Iconic figures such as Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and more recently LeBron James, have not only been extraordinary athletes but also social and cultural leaders. They have used their influence to promote social justice, openly addressing issues such as systemic racism, economic inequities, and the importance of education. In this way, basketball has become a means through which African Americans have been able to assert their humanity and fight for equal rights.

The growth of the NBA, from a marginal League to a global phenomenon, has further contributed to this dynamic. The League, which today is predominantly composed of African Americans, has become a symbol of success for the Black community, showcasing the talent and resilience of these athletes to the world. However, it is important to acknowledge that, despite significant progress, challenges remain. The NBA itself has faced accusations of institutional racism and exploitation of athletes, issues that highlight how the struggle for equality is not yet over. Another crucial aspect is the impact that basketball has had on the social fabric of Black communities. Through youth development programs, sports schools, and community initiatives supported by players and teams, basketball has become a tool for empowerment for new generations. These programs not only promote physical activity, but also provide educational and

professional opportunities, creating positive role models for young Black people and helping to break the cycle of poverty and violence.

In conclusion, basketball represents much more than a sport for the African American community; it is a lens through which one can observe the complex interactions between race, culture, and power in the United States. The history of this sport reflects the struggles, achievements, and hopes of a community that has used every tool at its disposal to assert its dignity and rights. As the NBA and American society continue to evolve, basketball will remain a powerful symbol of African Americans' ability to overcome oppression and use their talent to build a better future for themselves and the next generations. Only through awareness and a commitment to real change in sports governance structures can we hope for a future where sport becomes a true place of equity and justice for all.

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## Summary in Italian

Questa tesi si pone l'obiettivo di esplorare il tema del razzismo nella società americana a partire dal XIX secolo e con un maggiore focus sul XX secolo, incentrandosi in particolare sulla costruzione della mascolinità degli uomini afroamericani e sulla loro lotta contro i pregiudizi radicati, utilizzando il basket come uno specchio attraverso cui analizzare questi fenomeni complessi e stratificati.

L'elaborato parte dal presupposto che il razzismo abbia avuto un impatto determinante nella formazione e percezione della mascolinità nera negli Stati Uniti d'America a partire dall'inizio del fenomeno della schiavitù. A partire dal 1600 infatti, ebbe inizio la tratta degli schiavi che vide coinvolti circa 10/12 milioni di uomini, donne e bambini africani, che vennero prelevati con violenza e contro la loro volontà dalle loro terre e dai loro legami. Una volta giunti nelle colonie americane, vennero ulteriormente deturpati, per quel che purtroppo rimaneva, dei loro diritti, in quanto i loro corpi divennero di proprietà dei padroni che li acquistavano. Gli schiavi venivano considerati individui di seconda categoria, dovevano rispettare ed essere soggiogati ai bianchi, che potevano farne di loro ciò che meglio credevano. La situazione non migliorò quando il presidente Abraham Lincoln dichiarò la schiavitù illegale nel 1865 poiché negli Stati del Sud vennero istituite le leggi Jim Crow, le quali di fatto decretavano la segregazione razziale per i cittadini afroamericani. Questi ultimi non potevano in alcun modo avere contatti con i cittadini suprematisti, tanto che non avevano libero accesso ai posti di lavoro, alle istituzioni pubbliche (scuole, biblioteche, ecc.). Negli anni a seguire emersero anche alcuni movimenti suprematisti razziali, come ad esempio il Ku Klux Klan, che si poneva l'obiettivo di estirpare gli afroamericani dalla società attraverso atti di vandalismo, violenza, abusi e soprusi. Gli ideali che venivano perpetrati trovavano sostegno anche in alcuni studi e scritti pseudoscientifici, che fondavano le loro nozioni sul concetto di razzismo scientifico, un movimento culturale ed intellettuale che sosteneva teorie tali per cui esistessero diverse razze tra gli uomini, più o meno sviluppate, e che di conseguenza i cittadini del mondo dovessero essere suddivisi in cittadini di prima e seconda classe. Queste percezioni non solo giustificavano la discriminazione, ma influenzavano anche la concezione della mascolinità nera, che era frequentemente associata a una pericolosità innata e a una sessualità incontrollabile. Tali stereotipi servivano a mantenere gli afroamericani in una posizione subordinata, giustificando così

l'uso della violenza e della repressione contro di loro. In questo contesto, lo sport, ed in particolar modo il basket, emerge come un importante strumento di riscatto e affermazione per la comunità afroamericana. La segregazione razziale, che ha caratterizzato gran parte della storia americana, ha confinato gli afroamericani ai margini della società, limitando il loro accesso a diritti fondamentali come l'istruzione, la sanità e altri servizi essenziali. Di fronte a queste restrizioni, lo sport ha rappresentato una via per superare le barriere razziali, offrendo una piattaforma attraverso cui gli afroamericani potevano affermare la propria identità, sfidare gli stereotipi razziali e combattere contro l'oppressione. Inizialmente infatti gli uomini e le donne di colore erano costretti a partecipare a leghe e campionati amatoriali e professionistici a parte, ma bene presto i cittadini bianchi compresero le potenzialità degli atleti afroamericani e pertanto, per soddisfare i propri interessi e scopi, iniziarono ad includere un po' alla volta sportivi di colore nelle leghe bianche. In questo modo, lo sport, che di per sé dovrebbe essere privo di "colori" e fungere da possibili fonte di liberazione ed allontanamento dalla segregazione e dal razzismo, diventa un luogo in cui i cittadini neri solo alla mercè dei bianchi e delle loro industrie sportive. Tuttavia, nonostante questa situazione di sottomissione, ben presto i cittadini afroamericani cominciarono ad organizzarsi in movimenti che avevano come obiettivo l'ottenimento ed il riconoscimento del loro status di cittadini veri e propri, con gli stessi diritti della loro controparte bianca. Harlem, uno dei più celebri quartieri di New York, divenne il cuore di queste associazioni di persone, tanto che attorno agli anni 20 del secolo scorso prese piede l'*Harlem Renaissance*, un movimento artistico-culturale che permise ai cittadini di riuscire ad esprimersi in totale libertà, recuperando i legami con le loro terre e culture d'origine. Non mancarono tuttavia gli scontri armati e violenti, che portarono alla morte e l'incarcerazione di numerosi attivisti. In seguito, emerse la figura di Martin Luther King, leader del movimento afroamericano per il conseguimento dei diritti di questi cittadini, il quale dominò gli anni 60 attraverso le sue lotte prive di violenza che però scossero gli animi di tutta l'America tanto che organizzò una marcia sulla capitale Washington che vide coinvolti circa 250.000 cittadini. Nel 1967 venne poi organizzato un boicottaggio per le olimpiadi dell'anno seguente in Messico: di fatto si trattò di un tentativo fallimentare, ma che comunque risvegliò gli animi dei cittadini afroamericani e permise ai cittadini di tutto il mondo di aprire gli occhi sulla società americana del secolo scorso.

Il secondo capitolo si concentra sull'evoluzione del gioco del basket, tracciando il percorso che ha portato questo sport a diventare un simbolo di riscatto per la comunità afroamericana. Il basket fu inventato da James Naismith, un istruttore di educazione fisica, intorno al 1° dicembre 1891. Naismith, dopo aver studiato teologia, si dedicò all'insegnamento dell'educazione fisica. Nel 1891, mentre lavorava alla International YMCA Training School di Springfield, Massachusetts, sotto la direzione del dottor Luther Gulick, ricevette l'incarico di creare un gioco che potesse essere giocato al chiuso durante i freddi mesi invernali, mantenendo gli studenti attivi. Ispirandosi a un gioco della sua infanzia chiamato "Duck on a rock," Naismith ideò un gioco che combinava elementi di precisione e tiro. Il 21 dicembre 1891, scrisse 13 semplici regole che vennero affisse in palestra. Il primo gioco si svolse con 18 studenti divisi in due squadre di nove, usando una palla da calcio e due ceste di pesche appese ai balconi opposti della palestra. Nei primi anni, il numero di giocatori per squadra era variabile, ma dal 1894 le squadre iniziarono a essere composte da 5 giocatori ciascuna, a seconda delle dimensioni del campo. Negli anni '90 dell'Ottocento, il basket si diffuse anche in Europa, in paesi come Francia e Inghilterra, e nel 1898 fu istituita la prima lega professionistica, la National Basketball League (NBL). A partire dal 1912-1913, vennero introdotte retine bucate che permettevano alla palla di cadere facilmente a terra. Spesso i canestri erano attaccati agli spalti, permettendo ai tifosi di interferire con i tiri, ma in seguito vennero adottati i *backboards* di vetro per proteggere i canestri. Nel 1915 fu formato il Joint Rules Committee per uniformare le regole del gioco, che divenne poi il National Basketball Committee (NBC) degli Stati Uniti e del Canada, fungendo da unico organo regolatore amatoriale fino al 1979. Il basket si diffuse rapidamente nei college americani, ma un ruolo cruciale nella sua popolarità lo ebbero i quartieri periferici delle grandi città, in particolare Philadelphia. Questa città, con la sua lunga storia legata al basket, ha prodotto numerosi leggendari giocatori e ha avuto un'importante organizzazione sociale e competitiva del gioco. Il basket professionistico a Philadelphia iniziò nel 1902 con la creazione della Philadelphia Basketball League (PBL), alla quale i cittadini neri poterono partecipare solo a partire dal 1907. Nel 1909 fu istituita la Eastern Basketball League (EBL), che includeva alcune squadre della PBL. A causa della discriminazione razziale, molti atleti afroamericani non poterono studiare nelle università bianche, ma dagli anni '50, i college locali iniziarono ad accogliere atleti neri. Fu creata l'associazione informale

Big Five, a cui aderì anche l'Università della Pennsylvania, con l'obiettivo di integrare gli atleti neri nel gioco del basket. Philadelphia divenne un vivaio di talenti del basket, producendo oltre 50 giocatori professionisti, tra cui Wilt Chamberlain, Rasheed Wallace e Kobe Bryant. In seguito, viene analizzata la National Basketball Association (NBA), la lega di basket più famosa al mondo attualmente, la quale nacque ufficialmente il 3 agosto 1949, dalla fusione tra la Basketball Association of America (BAA) e la National Basketball League (NBL). Nel 1976, l'NBA si fuse ulteriormente con l'American Basketball Association (ABA), aggiungendo 4 nuove franchigie. La stagione regolare dell'NBA si svolge da ottobre ad aprile, con le squadre suddivise in due conference, Eastern e Western, che partecipano ai playoff per determinare il campione nazionale. L'NBA ha introdotto un draft annuale per equilibrare il talento tra le squadre, permettendo a ogni club di selezionare nuovi giocatori. La televisione ha avuto un ruolo fondamentale nello sviluppo e nella crescita del basket collegiale, con le partite del campionato NCAA trasmesse in diretta a partire dal 1963. Questo aumento di visibilità ha contribuito alla diffusione del basket in tutto il paese, portando alla creazione del termine "March Madness" per descrivere la fase finale del torneo NCAA. Infine viene ripercorsa la storia dei primi atleti afroamericani della NBA: negli anni '50 infatti la Lega iniziò ad integrare atleti di colore, nonostante le difficoltà legate alla discriminazione razziale. I giocatori neri portarono un nuovo stile di gioco, rapido ed energico, che contribuì alla popolarità del basket. Tuttavia, fino agli anni '60, ai neri fu permesso di partecipare solo come atleti, mentre le posizioni manageriali e di coach erano riservate ai bianchi. Il primo atleta afroamericano a giocare in NBA fu Earl Lloyd nella stagione 1950-51. In seguito, altri atleti di colore entrarono nella lega, sfidando le barriere razziali e contribuendo alla crescita del basket come sport globale. Bill Russell fu il primo nero a diventare head coach nel 1966, e Wayne Embry fu nominato primo general manager afroamericano nel 1972.

Nella prima parte del terzo capitolo vengono analizzate alcune figure iconiche del mondo del basket, non solo per i loro successi in campo ma anche per il loro attivismo e per le loro lotte contro il razzismo. Bill Russell, leggendario giocatore dei Boston Celtics, è stato un pioniere nella lotta contro il razzismo, sia dentro che fuori dal campo. Cresciuto nel Sud segregazionista degli Stati Uniti, Russell ha affrontato il razzismo sin dalla giovinezza, e ha continuato a combattere contro di esso durante tutta la sua carriera. Dopo essersi trasferito a Boston, una città che lui stesso definì come una delle più razziste nella

NBA, Russell fu spesso bersaglio di atti di odio razziale. Nonostante il successo in campo, con 11 titoli NBA, Russell si trovò spesso a scontrarsi con pregiudizi e discriminazioni, sia da parte del pubblico che dei media. Il suo attivismo si manifestò in vari modi, dall'abbandono di una partita nel Sud degli Stati Uniti in protesta contro la segregazione, alla partecipazione a marce per i diritti civili, fino alla difesa di Muhammad Ali durante il Cleveland Summit del 1967. Russell non solo rappresentava la comunità afroamericana, ma ne portava sulle spalle il peso, consapevole di essere uno dei primi atleti neri di rilievo in un ambiente profondamente ostile. Anche dopo il suo ritiro, il suo impegno per i diritti civili continuò, fino al ricevimento della Medaglia della Libertà da parte del presidente Barack Obama nel 2011. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, nato Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor Jr., ha affrontato un diverso tipo di discriminazione legata non solo alla razza ma anche alla religione. Cresciuto ad Harlem, New York, Abdul-Jabbar sviluppò una profonda consapevolezza delle ingiustizie razziali sin da giovane. La sua conversione all'Islam nel 1971 rappresentò un momento cruciale nella sua vita e nella sua carriera, poiché decise di abbandonare il nome con cui era diventato famoso per abbracciare una nuova identità spirituale e culturale. Questa decisione, come il rifiuto di partecipare alle Olimpiadi del 1968 in segno di protesta contro le ingiustizie razziali negli Stati Uniti, lo rese una figura controversa. Tuttavia, nonostante il boicottaggio mediatico e le critiche pubbliche, Abdul-Jabbar continuò a parlare apertamente contro il razzismo e a promuovere l'Islam come parte della sua identità. La sua carriera nei Lakers lo vide trasformarsi da "villain" a icona del basket e della cultura afroamericana, culminando nel ricevimento della Medaglia della Libertà nel 2016. LeBron James rappresenta l'evoluzione dell'atleta attivista nel contesto contemporaneo. Cresciuto in un quartiere difficile di Akron, Ohio, James è diventato uno dei volti più riconoscibili al mondo, utilizzando la sua piattaforma per parlare apertamente contro il razzismo e le ingiustizie sociali. Il suo coinvolgimento in cause sociali è iniziato presto nella sua carriera e ha raggiunto un punto cruciale nel 2012, quando lui e i suoi compagni di squadra a Miami si fecero fotografare con felpe con cappuccio in onore di Trayvon Martin, un adolescente nero ucciso in Florida. Da allora, James ha continuato a usare la sua voce e i suoi social media per parlare contro il razzismo sistemico, come dimostrato dalla sua partecipazione alla campagna "I Can't Breathe" in risposta alla morte di Eric Garner e dalle sue critiche al proprietario dei Los Angeles Clippers Donald Sterling per i commenti razzisti. Inoltre, James ha fondato la *LeBron James Family*

*Foundation* e la *I Promise School* per aiutare i giovani provenienti da contesti svantaggiati, dimostrando un impegno concreto per il cambiamento sociale.

Nella seconda parte dell'ultimo capitolo si cerca di dimostrare come il mondo del basket, in particolare la NBA e la NCAA, sia segnato da profonde dinamiche razziste, nonostante l'immagine di uguaglianza che queste organizzazioni cerchino di proiettare. Gli afroamericani, che iniziarono ad entrare nella NBA dagli anni '50, furono spesso sfruttati dai dirigenti bianchi che governavano la lega. Sebbene oggi la maggioranza dei giocatori NBA sia afroamericana, il potere decisionale rimane saldamente nelle mani di dirigenti bianchi, con una disparità evidente nelle posizioni di comando. Episodi come il "Malice at the Palace" del 2004 e l'introduzione di un dress code nel 2005 dimostrano come la NBA abbia cercato di controllare l'espressione culturale degli atleti neri, collegandola spesso a violenza e devianza. Simili dinamiche sono presenti anche nella NCAA, dove gli atleti-studenti afroamericani, spesso provenienti da contesti svantaggiati, vengono sfruttati economicamente senza una giusta remunerazione.

In conclusione, nonostante i significativi progressi compiuti nella lotta contro il razzismo, il problema è ancora profondamente radicato sia nel mondo del basket che nella società americana in generale. Gli atleti afroamericani hanno certamente contribuito a migliorare la percezione della loro comunità, ma le sfide che devono affrontare sono tutt'altro che superate. La tesi suggerisce che per raggiungere un reale cambiamento, è necessaria una riforma delle strutture di potere che governano il basket e una maggiore attenzione alle condizioni sociali degli afroamericani al di fuori dello sport.