

The Black Athlete at a White University

This is the second of two articles by Vernon Ford, a black Northwestern student, designed to help build communication between blacks and whites on campus.

By VERNON FORD

Complaints from Negroes about life on this campus are not just of recent vintage. In 1938 when two Negroes played on one of Northwestern's better football teams, they were not allowed to live on campus because they were black.

Last year, at the peak of what has been acknowledged as Northwestern's first major racial incident, an administrator confided in me at an unofficial meeting of the University Discipline Committee. This administrator commented, "As you know we have never had any incidents like this before." He responded with a funny smile, a searching one at that. There seemed to be a desire for this administrator to recall names and recite to me the many black faces he had seen at the annual athletic banquets. Since he recognized me from a few of those banquets, he realized there was no sense in pursuing the point.

The black athlete on a white campus is not unique to Northwestern. There are many inherent contradictions and paradoxes involved in this role. I am not trying to show that the plight of the black athlete at Northwestern is any better or worse than that of his counterparts on other white campuses; but rather that to assume that "things can't be that bad" because you never hear complains, is presumptuous.

TRADITIONALLY THE BLACK athlete is seen and not heard. He is a symbol of progress and the partial cause of stagnation. He is proving that he is at least equal, by being better than everyone else on the field. He is the pride of the alumni, but seldom their house guest. He is idolized by little white boys who may one day grow up to be his boss. The black athlete is imitated by the intramural jock who may invite him over for dinner, yet cannot invite him in as a member. He is also expected to find an adequate social life in a racially unbalanced situation without causing controversy. He is expected to openly accept the half-hearted friendships of his fellow students while suppressing the deep-rooted friendships of his home town boys.

In addition to these contradictions there is the athletic department. In many ways it acts as a communication sponge between the black athlete and the university community. The black athlete feels loyal and responsible to the athletic department. It is usually through the efforts of the department that he is admitted to the university. By virtue of this dependent relationship many complaints of the black athlete are smothered in the athletic department.

The athletic department to the athlete is, for the most part, his particular coach and staff. At times the coach may act as a counselor and as a friend. However, the dominant relationship is that of coach to player, in which there are inherent limitations.

Just as the black athlete (or any athlete for that matter) is dependent upon the athletic department, so is the department dependent upon the university. There is no tenure in coaching. The only parallel between the status of a coach and that of a professor is that of "publish or perish".

The fact that the black athlete is dependent upon a department that is in a conditionally dependent position should be even more revealing. Multiply this factor by the intensity that a school on the verge of greatness (NU) would have in de-emphasizing sports. Now you should have a clearer picture of some of the communicative pitfalls between you, the public, and the black athlete.

THE BLACK ATHLETE on a white campus is a unique phenomenon. Yet many of the pitfalls of this university community, as it relates to the black student, could have been predicted and possibly avoided just by a closer study of the life of the black athlete on campus.

With the increase of the non-athletic Negro on campus a clearer picture of the black student at a white university has been projected. Without the existence of a black complaint absorbing department, comparable in function to the athletic department, problems long buried were bound to come to light.

Our tradition-bound administration has attempted to work with the black student in the same way they work with the black athlete. That is by ignoring him, by refusing to recognize his presence.

When administrators say that 'Negroes are

not different from whites,' they are at best naively ignorant men. They are unable or unwilling to recognize very real differences. On the other hand, there may be a flat refusal on the part of the administration to accept Negroes, with their differences, as equals. In this case, there would be an attempt to negate the value of any difference, and force Negroes into an unquestioned pattern of conformity. When a Negro student is unable to fit this mold, he is branded a misfit. He is discarded completely and his passport to the North Shore is revoked.

The threat of dismissal is sometimes not as disturbing as the price the black student must pay for staying. I have heard various people give their advice freely to black students. The advice is usually to keep cool and suffer a little for four years, because the reward in the end will greatly exceed the minor setbacks.

I DON'T QUESTION the sincerity of these advisers but I am concerned with the results of following their advice. My concern is with an end reward so great that it requires four years of self-negation.

Upon graduation the Negro from Northwestern is a qualified window-dresser. His degree from NU changes his status from an amateur to a professional. He is now qualified for all the non-existing opportunities which would be made available to him upon graduation.

For those who are fortunate enough to find a financially rewarding position, they are again faced with the problem of self-negation. By living in the right community, joining the right clubs, knowing the right people and saying the right things, an NU Negro may finally become lower-upper-middle class.

I am less concerned with the economic plight of the black graduate from a white university, than with the development of his thoughts. The black athlete is dependent upon a white public to which he is financially chained. His position is visible and needs little explanation.

The black college graduate of a white institution such as NU must go through all sorts of changes to make it. He adjusts, conforms, reforms, compromises, becomes objective and goes through a song and dance to make it. Now what has he to show for it in the end? He has a diploma, but a

diploma which he went beyond the call of duty to obtain.

After working so hard for a degree which makes him qualified for so many non-existent opportunities this man is trapped. He is in a bind now that he has an interest in the prestige of this institution. The Negro who invests four years of self-negation in a white institution is rewarded. He is given the distinction of being one of the few members of his race allowed to graduate from a racist institution. For his uniqueness and distinctiveness is dependent upon the small number of Negroes graduated from the particular institution.

Because of the lack of real or meaningful rewards in the outside world, the Negro graduate runs the risk of turning his repressive frustrations within. He acts or reacts like the fraternity boy who barely made it through Hell Week. He will be obsessed with the values of a system that has worked against him.

This situation is unhealthy and unnecessary. Both internal and external changes must be made to change the plight of the black student. It is for this reason that I risk embarrassing what has proven to be an unresponsive institution into recognizing and implementing the necessary changes.

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