

Society and it's status quo



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Society serves as a window into the beliefs and attitudes of American life, revealing the true values of particular communities and humanity at large. At the high school level, sports can be used as a vehicle to teach children the value of hard work, dedication, discipline, and the role teamwork can play in attaining important goals. However, as revealed in H. G Bissinger's novel, *Friday Night Lights*, the desire to win can obscure the importance of instilling other important values. " There seemed to be an opportunity in Odessa to observe not simply the enormous effect of sports on American life, but other notions, for the values of Odessa were ones that firmly belonged to a certain kind of America, an America that existed beyond the borders of the Steinberg cartoon, an America of factory towns and farm towns and steel towns and single-economy towns all trying to survive" (xii-xiii). Sports are one aspect of society that has the ability to bring people together while simultaneously revealing the distinct separations among class and race. In most American towns is is common for residents to gather at a field or stadium to watch their hometown team compete against rival teams in the quest to claim the title of Champion. Fans put aside small differences to join together to root on their high school athletes, but once the game is over, life returns to normal. However, these fundamental differences may be more apparent than realized if the sports program is closely examined. What a town may claim to support or believe is often revealed as janus-faced hypocrisy. Sports play an important role in American life, and while it should be used as means of improving society instead, it more often not preserves the status quo.

The town of Odessa is extremely racist with the small percentage of African Americans living there were kept separate from the white residents by the symbolic railroad tracks. The Permian football roster gives the illusion of racial integration, but with a close examination of the role team members play and the treatment of black players and coaches, distinctly portrays the team's inability to escape the permeating racism in Odessa. The town fought segregation within the school system and manages to avoid enacting integration until the 80's when the U. S court ruled against them. The town's solution is symbolic of the racist attitudes. Instead of forced busing and any disruption to the lives of white students, the town closed the high school that was in the black neighborhood. The majority of residents in Odessa had never even seen the school, but became interested when they realized they could benefit from the integration, " But with Ector's closing, members of the white community suddenly began to see enormous value in some of its black students. It had nothing to do with academic potential. It had everything to do with athletic potential" (Bissinger, 105). The student athletes are seen a commodity, a chance to strengthen and increase the odds of winning games. The black student athletes were not welcomed into the community, any level of acceptance at Permian was strictly confined to the football field and their purpose was to bring enjoyment to the white fans. " We know that we're separate, until we get on the field. We know that we're equal as athletes. But once we get off the field we're not equal. When it comes time to play the game, we are a part of it. But after the game, we are not part of it" (Bissinger, 107). The blacks players were bussed into the white part of town and when they finished their job, were sent back. The interaction between races occurred only during practice or games. The mentality of the white

fans can be associated with the audience of a minstrel show. The blacks were the source of entertainment and when the white received what they wanted they pushed them back to the bottom of society. Neglecting to look beyond the surface the simulation of black people into the Permian athletics would appear as integration, however Permian sports in truth simply display the era's status quo.

The integration of schools should have been an opportunity for black student athletes coming to Permian High to receive a better education, but the focus remained on making sure these players were ready for Friday night. The lackadaisical approach to the education of black football players reveals the failure of the Odessa school system to ensure all students are adequately prepared to meet the requirements of being a productive and successful member of society. Boobie Miles was a had a documented learning disability and received his education in a small classroom setting, however the administration at Permian High disregarded these accommodations and placed him in mainstream classes. The classes he took as an upperclassman were more like courses that would be taken as a freshman. " Boobie was on a schedule that would give him the required course credits to graduate from Permian. But there was no way he could fulfill the requirements of the NCAA for the number of courses needed to qualify for a nonrestrictive scholarship" (Bissinger, 65). The school wasn't concerned with ensuring that Boobie was learning, just concerned with keeping him eligible to play football each week. " Some teachers worked diligently and patiently with Boobie, aware of how hard it was for him to concentrate. Others just seemed to let him go, doing little more than babysitting this kid who, as one acknowledged, was destined

to become the next Great Black Hope of the Permian football team”

(Bissinger, 66). Boobie is denied an education by Odessa, it isn't a priority to Permian High, as their concern with Boobie focuses only on the athletic ability he brought to their football team. The school failing the black athletes who are integrated into Permian supports the premise that the town isn't interested in making any significant changes to the educational opportunities of the black community, but rather satisfies with maintaining the status quo.

The mismanagement of the future of the minority football players by the Permian Football coach conveys the message that these students are less important than their white teammates. Although the town of Odessa complied with federal laws by implementing integration, only six percent of students at Permian were black. The majority of black students are athletes and some are the best athletes on the football team. These students have potential to be recruited by colleges and even a chance of playing at the professional level. For the majority of these students, an athletic scholarship is the only means of attending college. Their families are extremely poor and have no experience nor resources to guide these athletes through the college admission process. Brian Chavez is not only a talented athlete, but he also is very bright and driven to achieve in the classroom. His strong grades and athletic prowess make him a strong candidate for Harvard University, but the coaching staff isn't interested in securing his future, because of his skin color; “ The coaching staff at Permian did not contact the Harvard football team on his behalf” (Bissinger, 343). It is a common practice of the coaching staff to suggest players to recruiters and Ryan being one of the star players should have been at the top of the list, however he is not.

When recruiters came to Permian to discuss players with the head coach, he ignores their requests to discuss black players and tries to sway them towards giving the white quarterback a closer look. “‘ I gave everybody his name,’ said Gaines in his office one day, obviously discouraged. ‘ Nobody has stepped forward and said they’re real interested.’” (Bissinger, 314). The coach is blinded by color, he sees the potential of the white players and works to give them a better future, however he is blinded to the potential of the black players off the field. He wants all players to continue the success they experience on the football field, however he does not consider the powerful role he could play for the minority football players in giving them a future. The black athletes were important, but only for what they could do to help the Permian team and when their high school career is over so is their relationship with the coach. The neglect and mismanagement of minority players is made even more apparent when it is discovered by Chavez’s father that the film finally sent to Harvard highlights a game that Brian hadn’t even played in. The coach shrugged it off and stated it had been an accident, but that same error has never occurred for any white player. The coach has racist tendencies, which are directly portrayed within his actions regarding the minority player. His racism reflects the similar views that a majority of residents in the town of Odessa. Instead of using sports as a vehicle for change, sports at Odessa reflect the reluctance of society to make any effective changes related to race relations.

Sports have a unique ability to bring people together, to put aside differences as they cheer on their hometown team to victory. Sports also have the ability to be a vehicle of change, especially in areas where sports is

an obsession. The coaches and educators at Permian high school have the opportunity to only bright to light the extreme level of racism in the town, but the detriment that racist causes. However, the town failed the students and society. Instead of increasing the educational opportunities for minority students, instead of increasing the educational expectations of all athletes, and working closely with all players to ensure they were prepared and had opportunities for a successful future; the sports program at Odessa only focused on winning football championships. When a sports team is extremely successful they are more likely to have a positive influence on society and this opportunity should never be wasted. Some high schools, such as Falmouth High School use a football stadium as an opportunity to assimilate all students to come together to be apart of a victory by the football team. Whether it's cheering in the stands, playing in the band or out on the field, everyone is together uniting for one goal, the Permian High School misses this astounding opportunity.