

Promoting Academics: Student-Athlete Role Models in the Media By Cora Caulfield

When I am asked to describe myself, one of the first things that comes to mind is student-athlete. For the past four years, I have been a student at Northern Illinois University (NIU) and a member of the university's women's track and field team. During my time here, I have accomplished a number of things that I am proud of: graduating *magna cum laude* with a degree in Elementary Education, being named to the 2010 Academic All-MAC Team, and setting the NIU discus record. It is true that I am proud of my athletic accomplishments, but my academic success holds a greater value to me.

I may place my academic achievements on a higher pedestal than my athletic achievements because the positive role models in my personal life have excelled academically. This makes me wonder, though: Why are there not more positive student-athlete role models in the media? In sports media, it is rare to hear about an athlete's academic accomplishments. When you look at student-athletes who have been acknowledged as role models, it is usually based on their contribution to athletics. This is even more prevalent among African American student-athletes.

Charles Barkley once said in a Nike commercial, "I am not a role model. I'm not paid to be a role model. I'm paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court." Although athletes may not want to be role models, it does not stop the media, or society, from choosing to see them as such. This is why it is important to take into consideration how the media portrays athletes.

Graduation rates for African American athletes in basketball and football—both of which have significant representation by African Americans—are very low.¹ Research done on graduation success rates (GSR) by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) found that in 2002 there was a 63% GSR for African American student-athletes compared to an 84% GSR for White student-athletes.² Perhaps this discrepancy in graduation rates is caused in part by the lack of emphasis on academics in athletic programs, along with the manner in which student-athletes are portrayed in the media.



The unfortunate truth is that a very small number of student-athletes will go on to compete professionally. According to the NCAA, the probability of individuals competing professionally after college is 1.2% in men's basketball, 0.9% in women's basketball, 1.7% in football, 8.9% in baseball, 3.8% in men's ice hockey, and 1.6% in men's soccer.³ Knowing this, media should not promote a popular culture ideal that misguides the younger African American population (or any other population, for that matter) into believing that in order to be successful they need to achieve athletically. Instead, media—and society as a whole—should also emphasize education and academic accomplishments.

This does not mean we should discourage our youth from competing at a collegiate level. Participating in sports at a collegiate level can be beneficial. In fact, their athletic achievement may actually have provided them with an educational opportunity that would have otherwise not existed. This is witnessed by the statistic that roughly 1 out of 9 African American males on Division I campuses are scholarship athletes, as compared to a ratio of 1 out of 50 for White males.⁴ It is also important to point out that although the GSR for African American student-athletes is lower than that for White student-athletes, overall African American

student-athletes have a higher GSR than the general African American student population.⁵ Furthermore, over the past decade there has been a steady increase in graduation rates among African American student athletes.⁶

Taking into consideration the positive aspects of being a student-athlete, it is important that the media and society begin to recognize individuals that embody both the academic and athletic aspects of being a student-athlete. Paul Robeson is an excellent example of such an individual. Robeson's career at Rutgers University, where he was on academic scholarship, encompassed numerous academic and athletic accomplishments. Paul Robeson graduated as valedictorian of his class and was awarded 15 varsity letters in four different sports (baseball, basketball, football, and track). Robeson's additional accomplishments included induction into Phi Beta Kappa, membership in the Cap and Skull Honor Society, and earning a law degree.⁷

Rochelle "Shelly" Muskeyvalley is another example of a positive student athlete role model. I personally know Shelly, because she is one of my teammates on the NIU Women's Track team. Shelly is an African American woman who has attained a great deal throughout her collegiate career. Not only was she able to achieve an undergraduate grade point average of 3.778 while competing in track, but she did it as an Industrial Engineering major. Shelly has received many different academic honors: she won the Industrial and Systems Engineering Most Outstanding Junior Undergraduate Award, was voted secretary of Alpha Pi Mu (an Industrial Engineering honor society), graduated *summa cum laude*, and received the Jeffrey Lunsford Fellowship for graduate school. As for her athletic career, Shelly holds two spots in the NIU Track & Field All-Time Outdoor Records, for the 4x100 Relay and the 4x200 Relay.

Two more student-athlete role models who resonate with me are Nikki Franke and Arthur Ashe. Nikki Franke is a two-time Olympian in fencing. She was also the first African American female fencing coach at the collegiate level. Franke graduated with honors from Brooklyn College, and later she received her master's and doctoral degrees in Community Health Education from Temple University.⁸ Arthur Ashe attended the University of California at Los Angeles on a full scholarship for tennis. Ashe was the first African American named to a U.S. Junior Davis Cup team and to win the U.S. Men's Hard-court championships. Ashe graduated from UCLA with a bachelor's degree in business administration. After his career in tennis

was over, he pursued humanitarian work and became a leader in the fight for HIV/AIDS prevention. Ashe requested higher educational standards for all athletes and helped to develop several programs that combined athletics and academics.⁹

Role models like those discussed in this article are often hard to find, not because they do not exist, but because they rarely receive the media coverage and recognition they deserve. These are the success stories that should be glorified in the media. It is unjust for the media to create role models for our youth to idolize without taking into consideration the message they are communicating. Instead of focusing solely on athletes' contributions to their sport, they should take into consideration their academic achievements as well. Until then, our youth will be denied the positive role models that signify academic and athletic success.

In the accompanying lesson plan, students will be asked to identify what qualities a good role model should possess. The students will use the qualities they have listed as criteria for evaluating what types of role models certain individuals are. Moreover, athletes are major characters in popular culture and have a significant influence on how Americans view not only sports, but also ethnicity—specifically, how Americans construct African American men and women. This lesson can begin to challenge those constructions by encouraging students to see past the last second scores and balletic moves and think more about the fact that many athletes were star students before they were star players.

Notes

¹ Njororai Wycliffe W. Simiyu, "Triple Tragedy of The Black Student Athlete," *The Sport Digest* 17 (2009), accessed October 28, 2010, <http://thesportdigest.com/article/triple-tragedy-black-student-athlete>.

² National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Trends in Graduation Success Rates and Federal Graduation Rates at NCAA Division I Institutions," accessed November 3, 2010, http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/f015f6004477d89f977cb749973c7da7/GSR+and+Fed+Trends+for+Web+10_26_10+Final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=f015f6004477d89f977cb749973c7da7.

³ National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Estimated Probability of Competing in Athletics Beyond the High School Interscholastic Level," accessed November 3, 2010, http://www.ncaa.org/wps/portal/ncaahome?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/ncaa/NCAA/Academics+and+Athletes/Education+and+Research/Probability+of+Competing/.

⁴ C. Keith Harrison and Brian Lampman, "The Image of Paul Robeson: Role Model for the Student and Athlete," *Rethinking History* 5 (2001): 117-130.

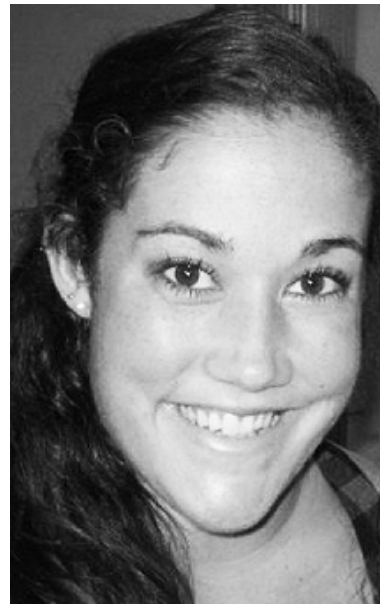
⁵ National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Trends in Graduation Success Rates."

⁶ National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Grad Rates Hit High Marks," accessed November 3, 2010, <http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/public/NCAA/Resources/Latest+News/2010+news+stories/October/Grad+rates+hit+high+marks>.

⁷ National Archives, "Teaching With Documents: The Many Faces of Paul Robeson," accessed November 2, 2010, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/robeson/>.

⁸ Black Women in Sport Foundation, "Nikki Franke," accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.blackwomeninsport.org/nikki_franke.

⁹ Encyclopedia of World Biography, "Arthur Ashe," accessed December 14, 2010, <http://www.notablebiographies.com/An-Ba/Ashe-Arthur.html>.



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Lesson Plan

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Connection to Middle School

Adolescents have many dreams and aspirations that are influenced by the role models in their lives. In today's culture, students often cite athletes, actors, or musicians as people to emulate, confusing fame and fortune with being a good role model. This lesson plan will help students identify the factors that make a good role model.

Goal

Students will gain insight into what criteria define a positive role model and will be able to determine if an individual is an example of a positive role model. Students will also consider the impact of student-athletes on society and popular culture and examine why academic achievement is not given as much consideration as athletic achievement in popular culture, especially in the case of African American athletes.

Objectives

- Students will evaluate qualities that characterize a positive role model.
- Students will analyze role models, using criteria the students have identified.
- Students will interpret through various media why an individual is a personal role model and the influence the role model has on them and society in general.

NCSS Standards

History

Help learners to identify issues and problems in the past, recognize factors contributing to such problems, identify and analyze alternative courses of action, formulate a position or course of action, and evaluate the implementation of that decision.

Individuals, groups, and institutions

- Help learners understand the concepts of role, status, and social class and use them in describing the connections and interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions in society;
- Help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings;
- Explain to learners the various forms institutions take, and explain how they develop and change over time.

Culture and cultural diversity

- Have learners interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding.

Warm-Up/Anticipatory Set

To begin this lesson, divide students into groups and have them discuss the following questions:

- What is a role model?
- How can you tell the difference between a positive role model and a negative role model?
- Why are some athletes more popular than people who excel in academics?

Give the groups a few minutes to brainstorm responses, and instruct them to list their qualities on a sheet of paper. Afterwards, ask groups to share the characteristics they identified. Then, ask the class to explain what makes a positive role model and a negative role model. Use a concept map of your choice to keep track of the answers.

Activity

1. Provide students with individuals that they will evaluate as role models. Choose a range of people that the students would be familiar with, but no more than five. Examples of people to use would be actors, musicians, athletes, inventors, or presidents; you can even have the students volunteer people to use. It is important to have examples of both positive and negative role models. Provide the students with short biographies about the role models, or time permitting, divide the students into small groups to research role models and create short biographies for the rest of the class. These essays can be added to a class blog.
2. As a class, using the characteristics of positive role models generated from the brainstorming, analyze the individuals. If an individual has one of the positive qualities that is on the board, put a star next to it. Then you can tally up the number of positive qualities for each individual, which will help the students determine if the person is a positive role model according to the criteria they created.
3. Based on the findings, have a class discussion on why certain individuals are seen as positive role models and why others are seen as negative role models, followed by what effects role models can have on people who admire them.
4. To expand the discussion, have the students further consider how positive role models affect society and popular culture.
5. Conclude the class discussion with a conversation regarding why they feel athletes are more popular than scholars. Be sure to challenge them by also asking why scholar-athletes' performance on the field or court is far more extolled than their performance in the classroom.
6. If possible, invite local scholar-athletes to your class to speak with your students about balancing academic achievement with athletic achievement and how they feel about the popular emphasis on athletics over academics.

Assessment

1. As a take-home activity, ask the students to reflect on one of their role models. Have the students create an interview protocol of questions they would like to ask their favorite role models. Encourage them to ask general questions that could be asked to anyone rather than idiosyncratic questions about an individual's life. (If you are pressed for time, students can write short essays about a positive role model and the essays can be posted in a class blog or assembled to create a class biography about positive role models.)
2. The next day may take some advanced preparation on the teacher's part. Contact a local or regional university's athletic director or a member of a team's coaching staff. Inform them that you would like your students to interview scholar-athletes for a class project on positive role models. After scholar-athletes have been identified, working with the athletic director, students can either email their questions to the scholar-athletes, interview them over the phone, or interview them in person. Have the students write essays based on their interviews and post them to a blog or assemble them to create a class biography about scholar-athletes and positive role models.

Additional Uses of This Lesson

- English class: Students can look at characters from the literature they have read and analyze what types of role models they are.
- History class: Students can research significant figures throughout history and explain what qualifies them as positive role models.
- Lesson can be used during different months (e.g., Black History Month, Women’s History Month, etc.).

Teacher Resources

- Charles Barkley: see his performance YouTube video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9XE7BijJA>. For stats and biography see http://www.nba.com/history/players/barkley_summary.html.
- For information on NCAA: <http://www.ncaa.org>.
- For a biography on Paul Robeson, see http://www.npl.org/pages/programsexhibits/Exhibits/african-american_month.html.
- For information on Nikki Franke, see http://www.blackwomeninsport.org/nikki_franke. Watch a video interview with Dr. Franke at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kz1z1aaBfNs>.
- Find photos, a biography, and other information about Arthur Ashe, Jr., at <http://www.arthurashe.org/site/#life>.
- For some tips on being a positive role model, see these sites: <http://devotedtoparenting.com/index.php/parenting/57-child/268-what-makes-a-good-role-model-7-characteristics-that-make-a-real-impact>
<http://www.purpleribbonproject.com/rolemodel.html>
- *Better than the Best: Black Athletes Speak, 1920-2007*, edited by John C. Walter and Malina Iida (University of Washington Press, 2010). Includes life stories and interviews with thirteen black athletes who rose to the top of their sports, many times against seemingly insurmountable odds. Many were the first African Americans to compete successfully in their sports. Athletes included are Arthur Ashe, Jr. (tennis), Don Benning (wrestling), Nikki Franke (fencing), Ken Hudson (NBA referee), Jennifer Johnson (Paralympics table tennis), Sam Lacy (baseball), Alan Page (football), Maurice Smith (martial arts), Mae Faggs Starr (track and field), Wyomia Tyus (track and field), Peter Westbrook (fencing), Mal Whitfield (track and field), and Lenny Wilkens (basketball).
- Joyner-Kersee, Jackie. “Should Celebrity Athletes/Entertainers Be Role Models? Yes. They Are Whether They Want to Be or Not.” *Ebony Magazine*, December 2007. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_2_63/ai_n21147780/.
- Barkley, Charles. “Should Celebrity Athletes/Entertainers Be Role Models? No. I’ll Say it Again: Athletes/Entertainers Should Not Be Role Models.” *Ebony Magazine*, December 2007. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_2_63/ai_n27460061/?tag=content;coll.