
Law in Sport Diversity and Inclusion Working Group

Race and Ethnicity in Sport Oral History Project

under the direction of Dr J Simon Rofe, Reader in Diplomatic and International Studies, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS University of London jsimon.rofe@soas.ac.uk

Transcript: Ashton Hewitt

Ashton Hewitt is a professional rugby player for the Welsh rugby team the Dragons. In addition to this, he has completed a degree in criminology and is completing an Msc in Human Resources and Business Management at the university of south wales. Ashton has played rugby since he was 17 and has been selected to play for specific durations at national levels to represent Wales.

Conducted by Aashika Doshi
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1- What is your conception or idea of diversity? To what extent do you consider sport and/or law to be diverse?

My idea of diversity is having representation, a representation of different people, different groups different communities, diverse culture, if you like, all groups. You know there's an understanding of each other, and the value they bring. There is respect for what individuals from different background bring and values on their perspectives around various issues in sport.

(I followed up and asked Ashton to comment on inclusion and exclusion in this area)

I think inclusion involves, allowing everyone from anywhere to sort of participate to get everyone from anywhere. The opportunity to participate to that enable diversity of thought made sense. exclusion, I would look at, you know, maybe a certain community or group of people being overlooked.

This extends to individuals from groups of people, or communities. I'm assuming we are furthermore referring to individuals within those communities or groups, being able to go where they want, and work to do what they want to do, without being treated differently with no exception. In addition, there should be respect for these individuals to represent differences in culture and practices in all sectors. After all it is not wholly appropriate to lump everyone together and ignore differences or sweep them under a rug. People from different groups or communities need to be included and allowed to effectively engage in all matters and sectors, particularly ones which affect them. This is an important element of creating diversity that overarches a society.

2- What motivated you to choose a career in the realms of sport and law?

I kind of just fell into it I was. I started off with playing football, wanting to be a footballer like most people in my area. There were more role models for me, personally, in football, and watching football. One day my primary school teacher forced me to play rugby. As it turned out I wasn't too bad at it, so I started juggling a few sports at the time. And then my talent in on the rugby pitch became more and more recognised, I progressed in rugby. And I saw it just rolling on from there. So I started off in school and then in the academy and then one one thing led to another. Once it

became apparent that I was actually able to make a career out of it I thought it would be a pretty good option to run with and see where it took me and here I am today.

(In response to any influences or events around getting into sport)

I had a teacher that encouraged me to give rugby a go and play for the school team. And then once I got involved in rugby. You know the school was wanting me to pay for the school and then I picked for Newport and then I have my local club side. And I joined that and we did the integrative plays. So that was a big factor as well. It was my experience that sort of club level was really great that luckily, I think when I was 12 years old, you're playing two years, and you are playing teams two years older than us because we were the team around and fortunately we are able to sort of get around it. But yeah, sort of the commitment of younger age conscious, you know obviously they've given up their time and doing it. And then, you know, the boys at the club, it was it was a friendship and a hobby as much as an aspiration.

Because from a very early age you start going into districts and you know your national side for under 16s, and stuff like that, so it all comes around very quickly so you find yourself, sort of caught in it, you know, fairly early on in your career. So you start playing at a club that we've had that for a couple of years and then sort of picked up by academies and stuff. Being a person from that club or be involved in an academy was a big thing. You want to be the guy that got picked. So, as a motivating factor that you know you sort of wanted to work on and prove yourself to.

What are the notable barriers you can identify or have faced/continue to face individually, along the way?

I wouldn't say it ended up being a barrier for me. However, racism is a very real and present issue in sport. I've experienced racism throughout my career. When I first started when I was a young boy. You know, talking about that club level. I grew up in a diverse inner city area. In Wales, the majority of the teams are scattered over the valleys which are, which are a lot less diverse.

So we would often be the case though because there would be racial abuse, the majority of the time came from opposition and kids and occasionally from parents at events. As my career progressed it was not something that went away. Hence through my career from a young age it is something I have had to put up with.

I did put up with it, but I think you could say there was the possibility of a my becoming critical and fed up with that and wondering why I am giving up my Sundays to be treated in that way, if that makes sense. My determination and passion for the game meant that racism did not materialise into a barrier and prevent me from doing anything that I wanted to do. But that's something that could have been a very real one to others.

How have you sought to respond to these barriers?

I think my coaches did what they could with what was available to them so in terms of to the governing body, and stuff like that but I'm not sure what actually came of those instances and those complaints, so I don't know the outcome.

(I put the follow up question of - is that something you would have liked?)

At the time no, because it was pretty likely that if I had racial abuse in a game that I will just react emotionally. I would react and get emotional, angry and upset. I started fighting it was sort of validated until the next time I got racially abused and then I would start fighting again. But you can't fight everyone.

So that's what it was for me I think I was, a bit too young to think about sort of policies and processes, off the pitch. It was, it was sort of a thing to get dealt with by fighting at the end of the day. It really could have been a barrier for me if I was seen as the kid, who was always fighting and stuff like that, and if ever there was scouts watching or whatever I don't know but I kind of got a reputation or whatever, because there's always fight on the field and, you know, potentially that you know that could result in a disadvantage for me and my you know aspirations to move forward to rugby so,

Yeah. And if I'm being completely honest by no means do I not feel like punching a racist in the face, and I think most feel the same to be honest, you know, a lot of the time they'll be very vocal on social media and calling people out and talking about these things when I receive abuse online and stuff.

I receive a lot of racial abuse online. There's been plenty of times where I've had to take a minute and get my head straight for my response to come from a constructive place to engage in a way that encourages something meaningful to happen and demonstrate what and why there is much room for change. After all I can't fight every single person that is abusive to me and anyone else. After all to react in that way, a lot of the time it just reinforces what they are thinking in the first place. My thinking is that unless you really do change people's mind.

My thinking is that unless you really do change people's mind, I attempt to take the time to understand them to try and get them to understand me, otherwise nothing's really going to change. So when it comes to individuals like that. I think they need to go through a process. One where educational initiative should come in.

And that's what I think is missing from sport at the minute is all that educational piece, alongside any sort of disciplinary or any sort of fine. Forcing someone to say sorry they got banned for a few weeks, maybe. And then that is that they are on their way still having the same thoughts just hoping they don't caught, you know, doing or saying it again. So I think the educational pieces issues the important mascot I've been pushing for, but again it comes from that thing you know that, where it comes from the top down. If the government bodies responsibility really to put those practices and processes in place, and those policies. So, you know, any victim of racial abuse is reassured that there's a chance of changing a mindset alongside disciplinary.

I'm at a stage in my career where if I react. How I used to react I'm just going to get myself banned as well. And, you know, all of the backlash that would come with that. But I genuinely believe that in order to address the issue of racism, education, and aiming to change mindsets is absolutely key to any sort of disciplinary. In the long term fighting isn't really going to achieve anything meaningful.

It's tough I have had my experiences that I was quiet about for a long time and the way I deal with it when I was a kid, sort of changed a lot when I got into a senior environment because, traditionally there a great hierarchy in rugby like there is a senior player, and you have you, Academy players. I went into the senior environment where there will be you know where there wasn't so many experiences of racism, with sort of malice and sort of harmful intent. That's when I noticed this all racial banter are really starting to come in, things that I'd be uncomfortable with. I just laughed off because I didn't want to rock the boat. That's when it's all sort of come to a point and from the realisation that actually you know what there was a time in my career where I treated playing rugby as a job because of the limited support around me.

I very much saw it as work and that they weren't really my friends obviously with some exceptions, but on reflection, more recently, it's been made clear to me - how important that is that I speak out so that a 17 year old fresh into the senior environment, doesn't have those same experiences with me such as not wanting to wear a tracksuit because, you know, you know get called stereotypical names and, you know, completely be their self. So that was a big one for me in terms of responsibility it's difficult because black representation is minimal in Welsh rugby. So I feel there's a lot for me to do, sometimes on my own, it is too important not to.

(Response to how to deal with reacting to racist remarks?)

It comes down to, to the governing body again, if you're playing under them, or for a club under them is near responsibility. You know, if you're with another workplace, you know they have a duty of care is their responsibility to effectively deal with the situation, and that is on the disciplinary side. When it comes to the offender and then also the other side for the victim support. There needs to be a combination to provide that individual with whatever support they need they need to help them overcome the experience and be satisfied that it's being dealt with appropriately. More importantly to make sure that they don't feel let down

Outside of sport and you're just anywhere. It's a pretty tough one. I'm still someone who will confront something head on. If it was in a rugby game or whatever, then I know there will be consequences to my career but if I wasn't in my rugby environment- what then? It's been a long time since someone, has said something to my face. So

(follow up questions to governance failing the player)

My immediate thoughts would be the importance and strength of a union fight on your behalf. At the moment, there's a lot of black players associations coming into sport so they know what is needed. These associations are coming together with their members. In order to put pressure on governing bodies to implement change. So I think that's one avenue. I think if you're truly isolated. I'm, I'm really not sure on what you can do and how to react because you know you're either. You know you either get on with it. normalise it or you have the confidence to keep putting pressure on people to change. Unfortunately the, I don't think there's any quick fix.

3- If you could do just one thing in this realm in order to make sport more inclusive and more diverse, what would that be?

I think the one thing would be commitment and consistency. And I mean not in a way of no tick box exercises. And as an example, leagues setting up their own anti-racism campaigns because they're scared to attach themselves to black lives matter. But then that anti racism campaign, doesn't last, or it doesn't really do anything. You know, they put on a poster, or they put on a big screen at the stadium “no to or so and so, against racism”. Set them what is actually happening, to know I mean so in terms of commitment.

This includes education. I definitely think it's a form of top down sort of thing, and there needs to be education, not just with the kids, but with the coaches, you know, on how to deal with. After all it is not only the kids that would be racist, but also the parents. It is important that coaches understand and know how to deal with such issues whilst simultaneously getting support from their governing body.

END

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Published Online September 2021

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Keywords

Race

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