
Law in Sport Diversity and Inclusion Working Group
Race and Ethnicity in Sport Oral History Project

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What is your conception or idea of diversity? To what extent do you consider sport and/or law to be diverse?

My definition of diversity involves not only a spread of gender, ethnicities, origin, race and such, but also lived experiences and knowledge - in the form of intellectual diversity, you know? Points of views and perspectives. Now, having been involved in growing and/or attempting to grow a couple of businesses, I think something really critical to the successful growth in any sphere is having sufficient diversity involved so that you don't end up in a vacuum where everybody's just got a confirmation bias on what they're thinking. Instead, there's a lot of value in having something that, you know, in a beneficial way enables people to constantly challenge each other, so that they are working towards their objective - whether it's a product or service - bearing in mind all perspectives. Having that diversity of gender, ethnicities, race, etc. but also that comprehensive diversity of experiences and thoughts is really critical.

I don't think the law is particularly diverse, personally, at least in the States. In fact, for this discussion, I'll perhaps mostly refer to my perspectives stateside. I think that many law firms and the legal industry as a whole have been pretty much an abject failure in terms of seeking and achieving diversity. I think there's a lot of nepotism built into the industry, and I feel like there isn't a significant push towards diversity within the industry. Now, I think that is also a factor of a series of associated things because there are hurdles within the system of higher education in the US that prevent in particular persons of colour from potentially achieving the necessary educational degrees, and other qualifications and things that it takes to be considered an attorney in the US. Nevertheless however, I think it's not just the legal industry's fault and is rather a failure of multiple different systems. That being said, I don't think the legal industry is as diverse as sport. For sport however, I think it depends on what element of sport you're looking at. If you're looking on the field, the court, or generally any athletic arena of any sport, I think there is significant diversity, because sports organisations have realised that scouring the globe for the best talent possible is critical to maximising your success on the field. Off the field however, once again, I would say there's not a ton of diversity there at all. In fact, it gets progressively worse at each stage as you work your way up the pyramid of the sports industry. Once you get to that place, that level where

the majority of the money is held and flows to in terms of ownership. There is minimal, if any, diversity at that level. I mean for instance, there is not a single black owner in the NFL. There is just one black owner in the NBA. And that's out of 62 organisations. One! Then you look at front office positions, and you've got organisations that have never had a person of colour or a non-male person in certain critical decision making positions of the organisation in the entire history of the organisation. And we're talking about sports organisations now that have spanned a century or more in some cases. Coming to the coaching level, again, I feel like we've taken a huge step back. We're now down to four persons of colour that are head coaches in the NFL. Only two of them are black, and this is in a league where 75% of players on the field are black! So, there is a disconnect between what people perceive as the product, because it's what they see on the field, versus where the majority of the money flows and the power and control involved within that league or specific organisation rests. So again, I would say the legal industry and the sports industry have largely failed at achieving any sort of diversity and inclusive environment.

What motivated you to choose a career in the realms of sport and law? What are the notable barriers you can identify or have faced/continue to face individually, along the way? How have you sought to respond to these barriers?

In terms of the business side of sports, a part of it came down to just that I just didn't know anything else! From the earliest moment that I could kick a soccer ball and throw a baseball I was playing those sports, and a lot of my educational experiences we're driven by sport as well. Because, where I went to school and all such things and opportunities were driven by the opportunities I had through sport, and so I wanted to stay within that environment. Just because that's when I felt comfortable, and that's what I was familiar with. As for my decision about law school. I knew that I wanted to go to a graduate programme of some sort. I had been mostly focused on MBA programmes. But my advisor, an undergrad, whose brother in law was a partner at a large firm in Cleveland had started slowly, and then more directly, pushing me in the direction of law school, saying that while in the US, it takes you three years instead of either one and a half or two to get your MBA. Also with regard to the skillset I would walk out with, he said and I realised that I can learn the things that I would learn in an MBA programme through lived experience. That's not to

belittle MBA programmes of course, but at the end of the day you're basically learning how to go about building or managing a business, and in reality, you can pick that up as you go along. But on the legal side, for instance how to not only have the ability to be able to interpret legal documents, but also the critical construction of those documents. As this is in the US, you've got to have a JD, and then you have to take the bar exam, and you have to maintain your accreditation as an attorney in whatever states you're in, or practising in. So there are all these barriers that if you don't go to law school, you don't get access to. So it was a differentiator in his thinking and what he advised, I ultimately agreed that these differentiators would allow me to have a different skill set to allow me to work within the sports industry, that I wouldn't have otherwise had I instead done an MBA. And you know what, I represented a couple of soccer players, and a couple of musicians while I was in law school, which ensured that on the business side of the industry I was keeping my skill set sharp as much as possible, and consequently I was till engaged on that side of things.

In terms of barriers, being a white male in the US certainly reduces the number of barriers, especially when it comes to the sports business, so I'm not going to act as if I've run into many barriers. Any barriers that I've run into have been more by virtue of my economic status, and or my family's economic status growing up. I was the first member on either side of my family to get a four year degree in the US, and I was the first member of either side of my family to get a graduate degree. So, you know, in that sense, I had to build a network from scratch, so things like those were probably the biggest barriers that I faced, for instance not having any sort of familial relationship that could put me a step ahead in any way, and of course being limited financially. So all of that put some limits on what I could and couldn't do. However, I suppose I wouldn't change the way that I went about things. The only thing I would maybe change is while I was in law school, having taken an opportunity to work within a firm because I never did that. I always worked within sports organisations instead of working within firms. But even in that regard, you know, I'm not so sure! I now know I wouldn't have enjoyed that. I may have enjoyed having more money! But the actual day-to-day experience of working within a big firm, I know that I would not have enjoyed that atmosphere. I do remember a particular interview I did for a big firm in Cleveland. As I mentioned, my Advisor's brother in law was a partner at a big firm, so I leveraged that and I remember I sat down with the interviewer, and the interviewer looked at my GPA and my

undergraduate degree in sport management, and my GPA was actually fine! It was around 3.1 or 3.2 but of course, I wasn't by any means in the top 10% of the class or anything like that. And the very first thing she said to me after introducing herself was, how did you even get this interview? From there on I of course knew that the next half hour was just going to be us talking, and not a legitimate consideration for the position! So in that sense, as I said, I guess I wouldn't really change the way I went about things.

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 this would be more applicable, not on the field of sports, but more so to the institutional element of sports as well as the legal industry, is going to recruiters that are hyper focused on just the top 10, top 25 programmes, and explain that that's not equivalent to scouring for the best talent. You know, great, GREAT talent comes out of small places all the time. And so I think, spanning wider nets, as again opposed to having some sort of built in bias which states that you know, we only hire from a particular set of schools. Because when you look at the diversity of classes that come through those predetermined schools, you'll very quickly realise that, it's just a self fulfilling prophecy that you're never going to increase your diversity because those institutions are not particularly diverse to begin with. We're seeing it in professional sports now too, with a shift towards analytics, where to even get an entry level job with a professional sports team, you need a graduate degree in a specific field, and a background in something else, and with the prominence of big data and analytics, it is going to create further barriers. I have a friend of mine that's a writer who also says that even analytics are racist. And people always get mad at him for saying it! But actually, if you think about it, it does create an artificial barrier, hiding behind analytics. It almost becomes an excuse for why they won't be diverse going forward. For instance, there are requirements that we need this degree or that background or whatever the case may be, but then when you actually look at who gets access to those programmes, you realise that now you're never going to actually increase your diversity. So I think the critical thing is therefore expanding a wider net. And then a hyper US focused thing is, recognising that persons of colour are more valuable or at least equally valuable off the court as they are on the court. There's this whole narrative of brawn over brains which is simply not true! Many of these athletes that come through are incredibly

intelligent, but for whatever reason, are only valued for their athletic capability. And so I think that that's something that's more specific to the sports industry, is to recognise the value and contributions that people can make off the field as much as on it.

END

Interview with Ricky Volante

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