

Black, Athletic, Articulate

For as long as I can remember, football has been an integral part of my identity. Growing up in Brooklyn, NY, I would spend chilly Saturday mornings on green-and-white turf fields, surrounded by other five-year-olds clad in plastic helmets and shoulder pads. On a heavily black team, I became accustomed to the culture of African American athletes.

When I entered the boarding school community at Fay, however, my status as a black male made me the victim of stereotypes I was unaccustomed to. When my peers found out I did not play basketball, they were astonished. When I showed up for lacrosse tryouts, instead of receiving encouragement or support, exclamations of “But I thought black people don’t play lacrosse!” were practically all I encountered. My peers assumed that I would only be interested in what they called the three “black” sports: football, basketball and track.

Black male athletes are expected to leap high, dunk down and tackle hard. We are stereotyped as brutish, muscular and unintelligent and are expected to make up for our lack of success in the classroom by dominating on the playing field. Even at Andover, far too many people consider the primary function of black male athletes to be the strengthening of sports teams and the accumulation of alumni donations.

Articulation and intellectualism are considered mutually exclusive to black male athletes. I have been mocked for my attitude towards academics by both white teammates and fellow athletes of color at Andover, and, although the teasing is usually well-intended, it also stands as a testament to the pervasive nature of stereotypes at our school. Despite my equal standing as an admitted applicant to this institution, my peers are often taken aback by my ability to speak coherently and write clearly, and even though my disinclination to talk trash or behave disruptively contradicts the demeaning standard by which all black male athletes are expected to abide, the social perpetuation of the stereotype continues.

The assumption that all black males on this campus are athletes is not just detrimental to our position as equal members of an academic community, but also fundamentally untrue. Junius Williams '14, school Co-President, exemplifies this. Williams came from a family with an alternative take on athletics: his father played sports that are not traditionally considered “black,” such as lacrosse, squash and tennis. Due to his father’s involvement in less physical, non-contact sports, Williams did not grow up playing sports like basketball or football. Williams does not consider himself an athlete, and, as an outstanding leader in various academic and political fields, he should never feel pressured to.

Similarly, these stereotypes do not only constrain athletes and students of color. Eric Alperin '15, a white player on the Varsity Basketball team, often feels like he has to “earn” respect of black basketball players on his team. As a white man playing basketball, Alperin feels that he is seen

as lesser and needs to prove his worth on the court.

Stigmatizing all black male athletes as loud, rowdy and aggressive is offensive, demeaning and damaging to the well-being of all. What I ask, and what my fellow athletes of color ask, is that all Andover students spend some time learning about the versatile interests and talents of the black community on campus. Although some black males at Andover are indeed successful athletes and valuable teammates, others are artists, performers, intellectuals and leaders, and all of us are passionate and qualified in our respective fields. There is no immediate solution to the issue of racial stigmatizing, but through discussion and discourse, Andover can take the first steps towards breaking the perpetual stereotypes that hinder our black male community.

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