



BlackEconomics.org

“Dialogue on Professional Sports and Black Economics with Mr. Rob Robinson”

BlackEconomics.org advocates diminished interest and involvement in sports and increased interest in STEMAIR (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, artificial intelligence, and robotization) by Black Americans. However, the reality is that up and down the Black American spectrum, there is emphasis on sports, which ultimately leads to an aspiration to participate at the professional level. Therefore, we would be remiss if we did not seek to address Black Americans’ involvement in sports—particularly professional sports.

In this Dialogue on Professional Sports and Black Economics, we hear from educator, author of *They Always Get Passes Don’t They?* (about Blacks in the National Football League (NFL)), and military historian, Mr. Rob Robinson. Our dialogue began with a question about the underlying emotional stimulus for such a high-level of interest in professional sports by Black Americans in general. Robinson quickly turned our attention to the economics of the issue. The dialogue intensified from that point as Robinson continually highlighted important economic aspects of professional sports and where he would like to see Black Americans positioned in the future as beneficiaries of our participation in sports.

We invite you to enjoy the full dialogue below!

The Dialogue

BlackEconomics.org—*Isn’t it the case that for most Black Americans, players and fans alike, it’s all about “And the Crowd Goes Wild?” That is, isn’t it the anticipation, the finishing flurry, and the crescendo that gets us to finality of winning or losing? In the context of Covid-19, isn’t it important for fans to be in the stadiums and arenas to enjoy the call-and-response, the congress of players and fans, which makes professional sports so exciting, so intense?*

Rob Robinson

Oh, definitely agree in the ultimate playing out of competition for spectator sports. But . . .

The people who run sports are not lining their pockets by virtue of the people's need to engage in a watered-down version of call-and-response or the crescendo-building toward the thrill of victory or even the agony of defeat. What they know is that professional sports depend on a winner and a loser. In other words, owners making millions does not depend on their team being a winner. Think about it. Remember when the NFL (National Football League) pushed parity? Well, the ultimate in parity is each team ending the season, 8-8. Would that work for the NFL? No, because parity was "fake news." The NFL is based on a concept of elite versus elite teams, elite quarterbacks, elite wide receiver. Parity is democracy. Elite is the destruction of the democratic ideal by virtue of the corrupting influence of money. The NFL is mirroring what is going on in the political and economic spheres. So, what is driving the NFL and its marketing and its modus operandi? Just like in real life, education, the economy, and in politics, the winners are predetermined. The NFL cannot gain the maximum advertising dollar and TV ratings without the New England Patriots being a winner. It's predetermined. That's why they are not called the Boston Patriots. Look at Florida: Miami Dolphins - population 350K and 600+K in the metro area; Tampa Bay Buccaneers – population 400K and 800K; Jacksonville Jaguars - population 399K/Duval County at 800K. The real football fans are in the South, that's why you got so many pro teams, which is disproportionate to not only population but to median income. The Pittsburgh Steelers, the Dallas Cowboys, and the Green Bay Packers are national teams—America's teams (not just the Dallas Cowboys). The New England Patriots is a regional team, but it is the most important region in terms of advertising dollars. The workforce is highly paid, and the advertising is focused on those people and boosts the scale for all advertising. In other words. TD Ameritrade and Morgan Stanley elevate the price for advertising by Verizon and not the other way around. Verizon wants to influence everyday Joe, but TD Ameritrade is targeting the wealthier New England fans.

Consider what the NFL is peddling. Not exciting play or incredible athletes or the ultimate athletic contest. They are peddling "hope."

Hope. That's it. That's what the draft is all about. That's why 16 million people tuned in the other night to watch Roger Goodell read off the names of young men who fans hope will make their team just that much better to win enough games. And the Cincinnati Bengals should know there is no way they are going to win when the Queen City can bring only 300K people to the party? If the NFL can get New England to the Super Bowl that's 100 million people watching the Super Bowl. People in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and eastern New York are going to watch; they got money-honey. The owners are making money even if they don't win. If you were an owner, then you'd already know that the only way this thing can work is to know that I'm gonna probably lose when I play the Patriots. Realistically, they do not have hope if they are the Arizona Cardinals. The Cardinals will win when it makes more sense for them to win than either the Packers, the Cowboys, or the 49ers. (The 49ers are a semi-almost national team. But most people who live in Phoenix don't know that; that's why they have HOPE).

The NBA (National Basketball Association) is a different ball game. Right now, the NBA needs to have LeBron James in the Finals. How many times has he not been in the finals in the last ten years? In years past the trick was to get teams in the Eastern Conference to have HOPE that they could beat LeBron James to get to the Finals. Teams in the Western Conference would seek to make moves to help them beat the Golden State Warriors. Because rookies typically have little

impact on winning in the NBA, the entire game has shifted to free agency. If only we can make the right moves in free agency, then we can take down Golden State. All we need is a little HOPE.

BlackEconomics.org—*You didn't mention the Seattle Seahawks in your analysis. Where do they stand? Does Seattle project a more positive image of Black Americans in professional sports given their long-standing relationship with Russel Wilson—a Black quarterback?*

Rob Robinson

I appreciate you pointing out Seattle. I could not include that team in the national teams, nor as a regional one in the same vein as the New England Patriots. But I do believe that owner Paul Allen operated in conflict—not confrontational—but in conflict with the other 31 owners, who demonstrably exercise the prerogatives of racism in the pursuit of making money.

Also, I have pushed through my instincts to punish the NFL by not going to games and even not watching the TV only to realize that I would only be punishing myself. Last season I only went to two games—Baltimore at Miami, and Houston at Tampa Bay. You already know that three of those four QBs are young Brothers under 25 years old. And all three have been exploited by the NFL—already.

As far as racism in the league, you must understand that agents are so key to "fixing" the problems players, as workers, face. The way the NFL works the quarterback functions in two diametrically opposed roles. First, he is a worker, just like the other 45 or 54 (including taxi squad) players. Alternatively, the QB is the entertainment draw. Just like Miles Davis being supported by five or ten almost equally talented musicians. Miles as the "star" commands the big bucks and sets the floor for the remaining musicians. But NFL owners have manipulated the system so that the quarterback is treated like just another worker and the QB's salary is just that only and not whatever his talents demands as payment for the concert.

There is no need for an agent in the NFL; there is a table set for the salaries of each position based on years in service. The agents work for the owners in effect and when the contracts are signed, the players get paid in game checks and the bonus money is most often spread over the life of the contract. Yes, the bonus money is often front loaded, but the agent gets his percent the day of the contract signing.

Now you know these agents lend these Black players with less means dollars even before they declare for the draft. So the players live large for the months before the draft and signing. But they have got to pay the money back to the agent. A big exception to all of this is Lamar Jackson (LJ). I went to see LJ in the first game of last season when he threw the five TDs out of about 20 passes in the game. His mother is his agent. How sweet is it when your mother or father is your agent and the team cuts her the check when you sign and you just gave her the house you always said you would and it didn't come out of your pay? Come on now! You know the NFL doesn't like it, and you know that the clique that has historically represented Black players is looking for ways to constrain the number of Black agents. Obviously, the NFL will do everything it can to prevent twenty-five Black men playing quarterback with their parents or uncles as agents. No matter how they try to treat them as just workers, the business reality would then be as an organized, unified

group they would have leverage—real leverage. And think, that's why the media tried to push down LeBron when he brought his childhood crew in to be his management and changed the landscape in the NBA. LeBron is really historical in that way changing the leverage and tilting it toward players and using free agency as the mechanism for players taking the prerogative for predetermining the winners and the loser.

Unlike the NFL, in the NBA, the owners don't really care because that shift is not irrevocable. Also, the owners are not powerless in this latest iteration of deciding winners and losers. Case in point, as the NBA continues its globalization, the Dallas Mavericks is right now the epicenter. Mark Cuban has cleverly matched Doncic and Porzingas—German and Russian—and if the Mavericks can add the right pieces, they could end up in the Finals for a few years. Think about the European NBA market for that Finals. And the greatest HOPE of all—the great White hope. The truth, however, is that Doncic and Porzingas are not "White." Dallas in the West, and what about the East? I think you know Porzingas and Doncic, but you got to know the Greek Freak, Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks. Most Black people are great NBA fans, but they don't know that White owners are making strategic plans while Blacks are sleeping. Let's say Dallas and Milwaukee Bucks in the 2022 Finals. Think about the television ratings.

Black kids, especially the quarterbacks, mimicking LeBron in terms of agents and management can find a way to gain leverage in the NFL. That effort will inevitably pivot on creating the legal standing for enforcing NFL contracts. Remember, in the NFL unlike the NBA and MLB (Major League Baseball), contracts are not worth the paper that they are printed on, and owners can summarily decide not to hold themselves to \$125 Million/10-year contracts. They will cut you in a New York minute and fans never recognize "cut" is another way of saying "fired." But he had signed a contract? The first move for Brothers has got to be the contracts they sign must be enforceable.

It would take a Black quarterback gaining the stature of a LeBron James and having the consciousness of LeBron. In reality, LJ is a very genuine candidate for that role. He has had conversations with LeBron and, of course, I don't know what they talked about. But this kid has made tremendously aware business decisions in his two years. But I can guarantee the NFL will try to "Michael Vick," LJ. The guy was MVP in his second year. But if he and Patrick Mahomes (QB for the Kansas City Chiefs) would ally, that would be too powerful! I don't know about Mahomes' consciousness as a Black man, though. But LeBron has already shown the pathway—generally.

BlackEconomics.org—*What about the future? How should Black players proceed to gain more control/power over professional sports, given that they play such a significant role in producing the sports product?*

Rob Robinson

Black players must demand that the industry give them an opportunity to engage in a profession with prospects for long term, high-earning possibilities. All of this impinges on the ownership arrangement. As we said early on, the NFL concept depends on this model of metro-locality,

regional, and national allegiances and hope. Not only are teams tied to a geographical space for drawing fans and holding hope, these teams are subsidized by the local governments in those geographical spaces. With few exceptions, these stadiums were built completely or partially using local tax dollars. What a tall order for fans to demand that the teams be "owned" by the municipalities that they are attached to. Under that scenario, the operational revenue would become a part of the total revenue of that local government, and the most disenfranchised folk in that community would be the direct beneficiaries. That would mean that millions more would go to education of the underprivileged, disenfranchised Black, Brown, and White people—whether they be, Atlantans, Baltimoreans, or Duval Countians. That's where I want to see this thing go.

BlackEconomics.org extends warm appreciation to Mr. Rob Robinson for participating in this Dialogue on Professional Sports and Black Economics.

Mr. Rob Robinson can be reached at gator1rob@gmail.com.

May 3, 2020

--