

# FOREWORD

Big-time college athletics is a large part of the social fabric of American society, and Black males play an important role in its makeup. I have had certain experiences that speak to the realities of Black males in intercollegiate athletics. A native from Youngstown, Ohio, I was introduced to the game of football at the age of five. It was until I was 28 years old did I officially stop playing the game. I had an interesting journey during those years. First, I graduated early from Warren G. Harding High School to enroll for spring football at The Ohio State University (OSU) in 2002. That same year, I started at running back and helped my team win the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) national championship. Later I was drafted by the Denver Broncos in 2005 and finished my football career in 2011 playing for the Omaha Knighthawks in the United Football League (UFL). More than 10 years since my days at Ohio State fans tell me, "You look like you can still play." My identity to them is only linked to athletics.

Interestingly enough, so many guys are unable to adjust to life after football. They find themselves walking around lost. When I left OSU and was unable to find my way, I took to the streets. This decision led me to a series of poor choices. I began drug dealing in order to provide for myself. Soon after I partook in alcohol and drugs either to deal with the stress of life or as a way of celebrating the amount of money I garnered. Unfortunately this lifestyle led me to prison for three years and eleven months. It was through my incarceration that I was able to gather myself and evaluate the decisions I made that put me in a state of imprisonment.

Fans are cheering for the university and want student-athletes to succeed and win games, but that is where it stops. A lot of college athletes are unable to distinguish that. Black male student-athletes (and all student-athletes) must understand they are a form of entertainment; mere interchangeable parts where a great deal of people do not look at you as a human being. They are unable to get past the fact you play a sport. They say to themselves "You are who I see on TV." Any intellectual conversation or discussion that is outside of the sports realm, they do not want to engage you. For Black male student-athletes, they lack an authentic college

experience like that of other students on their campus because they are isolated. They are unable to express anything different because they do not know anything different. By the time they realize what they contributed to the university, their playing careers, eligibility, and time at the school is over. That was the case for me.

Shortly after my release from prison, in 2012, the ESPN production department approached me about capturing my personal journey for their 30 for 30 Series. Since the airing of the film, *Youngstown Boys*, people from various walks of life have requested I share my experiences. I have traveled to numerous schools, churches, as well as colleges and universities to discuss the issues pertaining to Black males and college athletics. I found talking to players from major Division I NCAA affiliated athletic programs most interesting. It is as if nothing has changed since my time as a college athlete. When I look out in the audience all too often I see young men who remind me of my younger self. Their only objective is to make it to the professional ranks. Much of this is because coaches and administrators perpetuate a narrative that guys can go to the National Football League (NFL) when in actuality only 1% of college football players advance to the NFL. This results in many of these men being underprepared for life beyond their dreams of longevity in professional careers.

While this may not be true of all student-athletes, far too many Black male athletes find it difficult to be both a successful athlete and student. Of the Black males I know who have played on the collegiate and professional level most of them state that the classes they took in college did not benefit them outside of the playing field. The majority of Black male athletes choose eligibility over career planning when selecting academic courses and declaring their academic majors. It may not be seen as problematic while they are still in school, but for those who did not make it to the next level of play, they have difficulty finding meaningful employment. For these reasons alone, players must be introduced to other careers and examples of success prior to college in hopes that they see there is more to life than the game of football.

I recognize that what I am suggesting is not a priority for most coaches and their athletic programs. However they must challenge student-athletes, and Black males in this case, to take the academic side of school more seriously. This is not some magical request. Nobody talks about the majority of guys who do not make it professionally. It is apparent that Black males put so much energy into a craft where the probability of making it to the top of that profession is not favorable. That being said, coaches, players, administrators, professors, and school officials must work together

and see to it that these young men acquire the tools and resources necessary for them to excel in something other than football. For all that these players bring to their respective schools, it is only right that they are able to find value and meaning in their lives once they leave the game.

Many coaches and administrators have also reached out to me because they have Black males coming from inner city neighborhoods that are socially and culturally underdeveloped and find it hard to adjust to college life. However, they are not in the proper forum. They are paid to coach football, but lack the skill set to address the social pressures and psychological issues these guys are dealing with. Through observation they simply lack the capacity. Yet the situation is deeper. You have very intelligent psychologists, sociologists, educators, and other intellectual minds that can collectively serve as a board to develop a personal development curriculum for a four or five year process. For me this book serves as the foundation for this feat. Coaches, faculty, administrators, and most importantly student-athletes have to do better.

It is so foreign for former athletes to have a connection outside of athletics let alone people outside of that realm to care in a different capacity. The editors for this book have helped me put in greater context how best to assist Black male student-athletes, and Black males in general. During the recruiting process in my particular case, none of the conversations I had with coaches focused on faculty or people outside of the athletics department. This is common. Black males fail to recognize the people they have in their network, which makes it difficult for them to take advantage of anything else, but athletics. I encourage them and those in their support network to utilize this book to educate themselves on the different realities that exist for Black males in college athletics and continue the conversation about the problems and develop solutions that will bring about much needed change.

Maurice E. Clarett