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Molly Harry  
*University of Arkansas*

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## College Athlete Activism: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Perceptions of Support in the Fight for Social Justice

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**Molly Harry**  
University of Arkansas

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*Through three tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT)—racism is ordinary, counter narratives, and commitment to social justice—this study surveyed athletes ( $n = 100$ ) from one Power 5 conference on their perceptions of administrator and coach support received for their activism endeavors in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Overall, most athletes surveyed perceived administrators and coaches supported their efforts by encouraging them to engage in activism, providing educational resources about race and activism, creating a respectful environment, and offering verbal encouragement. However, some athletes expressed athletics leaders did not do enough to bolster their activism or did not know of any support offered by administrators or coaches. Implications for practitioners include using CRT to acknowledge and challenge systemic racism in athletics, listening to athletes' counter stories to inform activism through sport support methods, and increasingly commit to social justice reform.*

*Keywords: college athlete rights, activism, critical race theory, George Floyd*

Racial injustice in American society is not new; nor is it new in college sports (Edwards, 2017). Traditionally, college athletes have not experienced the support—from institutions or society—to speak out against social injustices affecting their lives (Martin et al., 2022). Speaking out, potentially against those with power, such as athletics administrators or coaches, could hinder an athlete's relationship with their institution, coaches, teammates, and others (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018). In some cases, it might jeopardize scholarships or playing time (Raphael & Abercrombie, 2017). This is particularly true for athletes competing in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Power 5 conferences, comprised of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten, Big 12, Pacific-12, and Southeastern Conference (SEC). These conferences are the most commercialized, and therefore, the most lucrative (Singer, 2019). Thus, athletics leaders in these conferences are particularly powerful, while athletes, especially athletes of color, have historically not achieved significant power in these conferences (Hawkins et al., 2015; Singer, 2019).

Still, college athletes of color have a rich history intertwining sports and activism (Cooper, 2021; Davis Brooks & Knox, 2022). In 1916, Paul Robeson was one of the first Black students and athletes to enroll at Rutgers University (Cooper et al., 2019). He became the first Black student to graduate from the school and was also crowned a two-time college football All-American. Robeson also used his academic and athletic talent to engage in activism, and in his fourth year at Rutgers, he completed a thesis advocating for the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to be used to establish racial equality (Wiggins & Miller, 2003). He then used this as a springboard for his activism after his athletics career.

Almost 100 years later, in 2015 and during the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement, University of Missouri football athletes collaborated with non-athletes on campus to oust the president for failing to address various instances of racism and violence against students of color (Ross, 2015). For example, racist symbols were drawn across campus, racial slurs were hurled at students of color, and a white student event posted threats online to shoot Black students and faculty (Ferguson & Davis III, 2019). These racist incidents were also in the context of the murder of Michael Brown, a Black teenager in Missouri, by a white police officer. While one graduate student engaged in a hunger strike, members of the football team banded together to boycott the season until the president was out of office (Ross, 2015). The actions by the football team are also situated within two additional contexts. First, this activism aligned with the rise of BLM which predominantly protests incidents of police brutality and other violence against Black people. Second, Missouri football players' activism occurred during a reemergence in the rise of recent Black athlete activism, helping to dismantle the perception that athletes, particularly Black men, are solely athletes and nothing more (Agyemang et al., 2010; Ferguson & Davis III, 2019). Given the financial ramifications associated with the football boycott, a potential \$1 million dollar loss, the president resigned in less than a week (Ross, 2015). Ferguson and Davis III (2019) posited that the activism taken on by the Black athletes was a "considerable resource to achieving the movement goals" of ousting the president who failed students and athletes of color at the institution (p. 83). It is unlikely that this goal would have been met without the football team further demonstrating the significance and power of athlete-activist efforts (Ferguson & Davis III, 2019; Ross, 2015).

These are just a few examples of athlete activism across the history of the NCAA and demonstrate the historic link between college sports and activist efforts. Importantly, activism is

often placed on the shoulders of Black athletes who also rely heavily on Black administrators for support (Edwards, 2017; Howe & Rockhill, 2020). This was also the case in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd (Kluch, 2021), a Black man who was arrested for allegedly using fraudulent money at a store. During his arrest, a police officer placed a knee to Floyd's neck eventually killing him (McKnight, 2020). Members of the Black community, including athletes, and others outside of the Black community, had seen enough. College athletes spoke out and engaged in activism through sport (Cooper, 2021).

Scholars have highlighted the significance of Floyd's murder to this generation of athlete and subsequent activism (McKnight, 2020; Suddler, 2021). A need or desire to be involved in activism after Floyd's murder could stem from two areas. First, Floyd's murder is perhaps the most televised and discussed murder of a person of color in U.S. history, making this incident historically significant to a younger population that may not have yet witnessed such an overt act of racism (Suddler, 2021). Second, Floyd was a former athlete himself (Suddler, 2021). Thus, the athletes taking on these activism efforts, particularly Black men, saw themselves in Floyd, both as an athlete and as a Black man.

As college athletes spoke up, athletics administrators and coaches released statements condemning racism and injustice, while also emphasizing the need for their departments to be more effective in supporting the rights and experiences of athletes of color (Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022; Ofoegbu & Ekpe, 2022). Similarly, athletes surveyed by Bunch and Cianfrone (2022) perceived that the athletics department had a duty to engage in activism. While, much of the previous scholarship has acknowledged the lack of support athletes receive regarding their activist efforts (Edwards, 2017; Kaufman, 2008), a recent study by Martin and colleagues (2022) used survey data to demonstrate that college athletes participating in activism generally felt supported by members in their social systems. Given the mixed results in this area, more research on athletes' perceptions of activism support is warranted. Without this enhanced knowledge on athletes' perceptions of support, scholars, practitioners, and other activists may not be supporting college athletes in the ways they wish to be supported (Martin et al., 2022). In turn, these agents in athletes' lives may not be living up to their ally potential.

This historical moment presents an opportunity to examine the experiences of college athletes and their perceptions of activism support. The purpose of this research is to explore how athletes in one Power 5 conference perceived the support they received from athletics administrators and coaches during their social justice endeavors in the wake of Floyd's murder.

## Literature Review

### *Race, Racism, and College Sports*

According to Feagin (2006), "systemic racism encompasses a broad range of racialized dimensions of this society: the racist framing, racist ideology, stereotyped attitudes, racist emotions, discriminatory habits and actions, and extensive racist institutions developed over centuries by whites" (p. xii). Systemic racism is ingrained in college athletics as intercollegiate sports were established, and arguably maintained, for white men, particularly those from affluent backgrounds (Hextrum, 2019; Singer, 2019). Thus, systemic racism in sports is pervasively embedded in the policies, practices, and beliefs of athletics institutions and allows for the continued oppression of athletes of color (Hextrum, 2019).

For example, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement athletics institutions implemented policy changes that were superficially created to advance Black athletics leaders into positions of power, such as establishing diversity boards/committees (Edwards, 2016). In reality, such positions were made to “stifle radical racial progress” and serve as “diversionary tactics” as they still maintained white dominance in leadership positions (Cooper et al., 2019, p. 158). Even today, some athletics diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) officer positions may be seen as little more than a façade as white men still maintain the majority of powerful positions across the NCAA (Wright-Mair et al., 2021). For example, in 2021, in the Power 5 conferences, 78% of athletic directors (ADs) were white, 15% were Black, and the remaining 7% were Hispanic/Latino or unknown (NCAA demographic database, n.d.). If systemic racism in athletics were to truly be challenged, these numbers would have shifted significantly over the years, which has not been the case (Lapchick, 2020).

Diverse representation in leadership positions matter and the current under-representation of Black and other leaders of color in sports further challenges the well-being of athletes, particularly athletes of color (Howe & Rockhill, 2020; Singer, 2019). For example, in interviews with upper level Black athletics administrators, Howe and Rockhill (2020) noted this lack of representation leaves “Black administrators and Black student-athletes feeling frustrated and uncomfortable” (p. 179). Additionally, missing diversity in leadership positions at their schools may make athletes question their own positions as people of color within their teams, departments, and greater communities (Comeaux & Fuentes, 2015; Singer, 2019). Similarly, due to interest convergence and the challenges activism can bring to the current structure of college athletics that favor white men in positions of power, white leaders may have a more negative perspective of athlete activism compared to leaders of color (Cooper, 2021; Howe and Rockhill, 2020).

Systemic racism also plays a pivotal role in the experiences of athletes when it comes to practices across the NCAA, particularly the practice of schooling versus education. Singer (2019) noted that schooling gives the façade of knowledge generation but really perpetuates power relations and institutional structures that have historically privileged whites. On the other hand, education transfers knowledge from one generation to the next, enabling learners to engage with their history and culture and challenge dominant power networks. Schooling perpetuates the miseducation of athletes of color (Singer, 2019), and may even stem from beliefs that athletes, especially Black athletes, are intellectually inferior to white athletes (Hextrum, 2019). This perspective maintains the white-as-dominant race myth that Black athlete-activists have fought against for decades (Wiggins & Miller, 2003).

One way for athletes to challenge miseducation is activism through sport (Edwards, 2017). In fact, sports may serve as a beneficial activism platform for athletes as they begin to speak out for systemic social reform (Cooper, 2021; Wiggins & Miller, 2003). In their activism through sport, athletes increase their autonomy, take ownership of their education and development, and therefore, dismantle systems that reinforce oppression. Thus, the recent shift in athlete activism offers a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which athletes seek and feel supported in their activism quests while also elevating and appreciating their narratives (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018).

## *Activism and College Athlete Activism Through Sport*

Athlete activism often emerges because issues of social injustice continue to permeate intercollegiate sports (Agyemang et al., 2010; Bell, 2016; Cooper et al., 2019; Edwards, 2017). Social justice is the notion of a just relationship between society and all individuals, regardless of race, gender, identity, ability, religion, or class (Novak, 2009). One platform for further social justice discourse includes activism through sports. Cooper and colleagues (2019) defined activism as “engagement in intentional actions that disrupt oppressive hegemonic systems by challenging a clearly defined opposition while simultaneously empowering individuals and groups disadvantaged by inequitable arrangements” (p. 154). Activism through sport involves individuals/groups affiliated with athletics using their platforms/resources to disrupt broader societal structures, practices, and policies (Cooper, 2021; Cooper et al., 2019). Activism through sport can occur across various contexts, with the focus of this study on activism through sport in college athletics.

To contextualize athlete activism within broader societal and cultural frameworks, Dr. Harry Edwards (2016) proposed a four-wave model of athlete activism. In the first wave of activism, athletes emphasized gaining legitimacy and challenging white dominance (Cooper et al., 2019; Edwards, 2016). For college athletes, like Paul Robeson, this centered on challenging the white-as-dominant-race narrative in American culture and sports (Wiggins & Miller, 2003). Edwards’ (2016) second wave highlighted Black athletes gaining access and positional diversity. While this wave included the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), athletes continued to push for desegregation in sports and higher education as the *Brown* ruling did not lead to changes overnight. For example, Irwin Holmes became one of the first Black athlete at North Carolina State University in 1958, four years after *Brown* (Peeler, 2018). Holmes was captain of the men’s tennis team and was the first Black undergraduate to earn a degree (Peeler, 2018). Other universities took years to integrate, not admitting Black students or athletes until the late 1960s, further demonstrating significant obstacles Black athletes had to overcome during this wave (Cooper et al., 2019).

Cooper and colleagues (2019) noted the third wave, taking place during the Civil Rights era, focused on “demanding dignity and respect” as activism and “racial consciousness” reached peak levels (p. 158). During this wave, college athletes brought their personal and societal aspirations into the sporting arena (Edwards, 2016; Wiggins & Miller, 2003). The fourth wave of athlete activism emerged in the early 2000s after a period of relatively little activism from the 1970s-2005 (Edwards, 2016). Post-Civil Rights Movement, Edwards (2016) contended sport governing bodies made moderate modifications to attempt to appease and silence Black athlete-activists, while maintaining their dominant positions and ideologies of color-blindness, meritocracy, and capitalism.

The fourth wave, currently taking place, focuses on gaining and transferring economic and technological capital (Cooper et al., 2019). While professional athlete instances abound (e.g., LeBron James, Serena Williams, etc.), college athletes, particularly since the passage of name, image, and likeness (NIL) legislation, have also been able to use their technology/social media resources to increase their economic capital, and promote themselves and causes they care about. Indeed, Black college athletes have used their sport status to promote BLM during this wave—such as the football players at Missouri—heightening consciousness about racial injustices and police brutality in American society (Cooper et al., 2019; Kluch, 2020; Martin et al., 2022).

Scholars and practitioners have a fairly strong grasp as to why athletes partake in

activism, such as responsible citizenship and desiring social changes. Additionally, Kaufman and Wolff (2010) argued that two significant parallels between sport and activism participation made this nexus potentially appealing to athletes. First, both sport and activism involve discipline, goal management, and long term outlooks (Cooper et al., 2019; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Second, sport and activism both center the pursuit of progress. Thus, what makes “athletes excel in the sporting arena” is “similar to what allowed them to be successful in the activist arena” (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010, p. 170). However, despite knowing the “why” behind the growth in activism in this fourth wave, the sport management field knows relatively little about athletes’ needs and/or perceptions of activism support (Kluch, 2020; Martin et al., 2022).

In line with the parallels proposed by Kaufman and Wolff (2010), in order for athletes to be successful in activism, they need support from key actors in their lives, like administrators and coaches. Similarly, previous scholarship demonstrated support/lack of support from significant others swayed athletes’ activism involvement. For example, in interviews with Division III Black male athletes, Fuller and Agyemang (2018) found participants perceived coaches would not support their activism due to potentially negative implications for their team/institution. This perception hindered their desire to engage in activism (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018).

Still, with the activism surge in the summer and fall of 2020 due to Floyd’s murder, it is unlikely that athlete involvement in social justice activities will decrease (Kluch, 2021). So, as college athletes continue activism through sport, it is crucial that scholars and practitioners further understand their experiences in these endeavors.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began in legal studies, and emerged from the critical thoughts and works of scholars like Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT scholars note that race was socially and legally constructed by white, affluent men to solidify—even codify—permanent power for white society (Feagin, 2006; Singer et al., 2017). In this way, racism is systemic as it extends “beyond individual or group acts of racial prejudice and bigotry to the institutional level” (Singer et al., 2017, p. 18). Examples of systemic racism are evidenced in housing discrimination as the effects of redlining are still felt today, gerrymandering voting districts to suppress Black votes, employment discrimination that favors white applicants, and exploitation of Black male athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics, just to name a few (Bell, 1995; Edwards, 2017; Feagin, 2006).

In their efforts to understand and dismantle systemic racism forces, scholars have used CRT across fields of study, including education and athletics. CRT is “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). This is accomplished through its five tenets: (1) racism is ordinary, (2) interest convergence, (3) counter-storytelling, (4) commitment to social justice, and (5) interdisciplinary lenses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Singer et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005). The first, third, and fourth tenets are central to this study.

The first tenet notes that racism is not aberrational (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Regarding college athlete activism research, other scholars have used CRT and specifically this first tenet in exploring Black male athletes participating in activism (Agyemang et al., 2010). Agyemang and colleagues (2010) interviewed Black male athletes to unpack their

perspectives on racism and activism. Through the lens of the first tenet of CRT, athletes in this sample noted that progress in decreasing racism, but racism was still rampant in athletics. Other key components to the first tenet of CRT are meritocracy and color blindness.

The next tenet applied in this research is the concept of counter-storytelling, which challenges white dominant narratives and centers experiential knowledge. Using counter narratives to address issues of social and racial inequity is powerful, persuasive, and can offer explanations that may enable members from outside communities of color unlearn certain beliefs and better empathize with non-whites (Crenshaw et al., 1995). These counter stories dismantle “majoritarian stories,” which are predominantly white, and silence the experiences and words of communities of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Agyemang et al. (2010) also employed this tenet of CRT in their interviews with Black male athletes and found their sample of athletes had a heightened awareness of the athlete-activists who came before them. Their narratives countered statements made by scholars and media members that Black athletes today are not familiar with their activist predecessors (Agyemang et al., 2010).

Finally, commitment to social justice is at the heart of this work and activism through sport. Commitment to social justice “offers a liberatory and transformative response” to oppression that empowers people of color (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). Through such commitment, traditionally oppressed groups expose structural racism, challenge white dominant perspectives, share their narratives, and elicit important change. Some examples of ways in which athletes might engage in this commitment are through organizing summits on race/racism or establishing student-organizations focusing on social justice reforms on campus. Leaders in athletics may also engage with this tenet of CRT. For example, Ofoegbu and Ekpe (2022) used CRT to examine athletics departments’ released responses to the murder of George Floyd. Concerning a commitment to social justice, the statements contained words like “us” and “we” to signal unity (Ofoegbu & Ekpe, 2022). However, the statements still fell flat as they lacked stronger commitments to social justice, failing to acknowledge the role of race in Floyd’s death and systemic violence against people of color by law enforcement (Ofoegbu & Ekpe, 2022).

Critical lenses are increasingly important in understanding the experiences of athletes as this population becomes more diverse (Raphael & Abercrombie, 2017; Howe, 2022; Singer et al., 2017); therefore, CRT is an appropriate theory to employ when exploring athletes’ perceptions of support regarding their activism. Additionally, CRT has been used in other literature examining athlete activism (Agyemang, 2010; Cooper et al., 2019; Ofoegbu & Ekpe, 2022; Singer et al., 2017). This theoretical perspective allows for enhanced exploration and understanding of the experiences of college athletes and their perceptions of support while also moving their voices to the forefront of social justice. With this context, this study sought to answer the following research question: How did college athletes perceive administrator and coach support during their social justice endeavors in the wake of George Floyd’s murder?

## Methods

### *Site and Participants*

This survey research was funded by a research initiative from one Power 5 conference and was then approved by the researcher’s institutional review board. Next, ADs for DEI in the conference were contacted to request athlete participation. If a department did not have such a position, ADs for athlete development were contacted. Nine institutions participated, eight of



which were public institutions. Through stratified random sampling, 25% of each team was selected to ensure proportional representation (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Additionally, sports included in this study were limited to those with broad-based participation per the request of the conference funding this research. If six or fewer departments sponsored a sport, these sports were not included in this analysis to ensure accurate representation of the conference as a whole. See sport profiles in Table 1.

Athlete names were compiled from department rosters, and emails collected from school directories. Athletes received the survey via email anywhere from December 2020 through February 2021. Two weeks after the initial surveys were distributed, a reminder email was sent. After this, the survey closed at the end of February 2021. Of the 1044 athletes who received the survey via Qualtrics, 100 completed it, resulting in a response rate of almost 10%.

***Athlete Demographics.*** Of the athletes who completed this survey, the most respondents came from women's track and field, followed by men's track and field, women's cross country, and softball. The fewest respondents came from women's golf, men's basketball, men's tennis, and men's golf. All 19 sports surveyed were represented by at least one athlete. Additionally, the majority of athletes were in their third, fourth, or fifth year of eligibility ( $n = 53$ , 53%).

Table 1

*Athlete Sport Profile*

Sport	<i>n</i>	%
Women's Track/Field	18	16%
Men's Track/Field	10	9%
Women's Cross Country	10	9%
Softball	10	9%
Women's Soccer	9	8%
Women's Swimming/Diving	8	7%
Men's Swimming/Diving	7	6%
Women's Lacrosse	6	5%
Baseball	4	4%
Women's Basketball	4	4%
Football	4	4%
Men's Soccer	4	4%
Volleyball	4	4%
Men's Cross Country	3	3%
Women's Tennis	3	3%
Men's Basketball	2	2%
Women's Golf	2	2%
Men's Golf	1	1%
Men's Tennis	1	1%
Total	110	100%

*Note.* The number exceeds 100 as some athletes compete in multiple sports

Women's sports athletes were overrepresented in this sample with almost 2/3 of the responses. Research shows women are more likely to complete online surveys and are more likely to engage in political and social activity than men (Galston, 2018; Smith, 2008). Thus, women may have been more inclined to complete the survey given potential higher interest levels amongst this population. Finally, the majority of athletes identified as white. See Tables 2 and 3 for more information about athletes' gender identification and racial identity, respectively.

Table 2

*Athlete Self-Identification*

Choice	<i>n</i>	%
Man	34	34%
Woman	65	65%
Prefer to self-describe	1	1%
Total	100	100%

Table 3

*Athlete Race*

Choice	<i>n</i>	%
White	46	46%
Blank	27	27%
Black or African American	16	16%
Hispanic or Latinx	6	6%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2	2%
Prefer to specify	2	2%
Asian	1	1%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0%
Total	100	100%

### *Procedures and Data Analysis*

With respect to athlete time demands, a brief survey instrument was created for this study (Alreck & Settle, 2004). Two researchers (one white and one Black) and one athletics administrator (Black) across this conference's institutions reviewed the survey, helping to ensure content validity of the instrument (Alreck & Settle, 2004). The survey instrument was 19 questions, consisting of four demographic questions, two questions about perceptions of racism (one closed-ended, one open-ended), four closed-ended questions to assess participant familiarity with the George Floyd murder and athletics department responses. Additionally, there were nine open-ended questions addressing how athletes engaged in and how they saw coaches and administrators engage in activism after the incident and their perceptions of support they received from administrators and their head coach.

The three CRT tenets discussed above were converted into a coding a framework, thus, deductive analysis was used to examine participants' responses (Miles et al., 2020). A deductive

approach offers many benefits, particularly as it ensures structure and theoretical relevance throughout the research process. Using the same framework, a second researcher coded 25% of the responses which resulted in 96% agreement. For the four percent with different codes, the researchers discussed until both were satisfied with the classification (Miles et al., 2020).

### *Positionality, Reflexivity, and CRT*

I embraced a social constructivist paradigm to explore college athlete activism (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Social constructivism contends that individuals construct their own knowledge and make meaning of the world around them through their experiences and reflecting on those experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontologically, social constructivism recognizes individuals have different understanding about a phenomenon. Epistemologically, this paradigm emphasizes that knowledge can be created between the researcher and those being researched (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Thus, employing CRT as a white researcher, I recognized the importance of “strategic and sensitive use” of this theory (Bergerson, 2003, p. 51). The goal of this work is not for me to represent the experiences of athletes of color and center whiteness in this study. Rather, using CRT can assist in this research in three ways: (1) placing race/racism at the center of research on athletics, (2) using CRT to advocate for social justice, and (3) legitimizing research on groups that have traditionally been marginalized, especially athletes of color (Bergerson, 2003). Thus, for the open-ended responses, I made a conscious effort to elevate the narratives of athletes of color who participated in the study (Bergerson, 2003; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021). The responses of white athletes were used to supplement the statements made by athletes of color or demonstrate ways in which white participants upheld systems of power.

Finally, I recognized a need for reflexivity which is encouraged by qualitative scholars and researchers studying college athletics (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021). Reflexivity is necessary when topics concern race/racism and is especially critical when white researchers seek knowledge about the lived experiences and narratives of those from marginalized communities. The practice of reflexivity involves positioning oneself so that self-awareness of interconnections between self, others, and society are clear. As such, researcher biases cannot be fully removed; instead, subjectivity is acknowledged (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021). As a social constructivist, my paradigm underpinned and influenced this research, and because of this, I acknowledge my position of privilege stemming from my identity as a white scholar completing research on racially minoritized athletes (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021). When white researchers conduct studies with/on participants of color, the research may perpetuate existing systemic inequalities and reinforce the current racial order that continues to favor white dominance as white researchers benefit from the scholarship, too (Bergerson, 2003; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021).

In an effort to challenge white dominance and center athletes of color in this study, reflexivity was performed at all stages of this research. This began with the project’s conceptualization as a survey research project. With my social constructivist lens, survey methods were appropriate as some of the goals were quantitative (i.e., learning how many athletes participated in activism and in what ways) and other objectives were qualitative (i.e., how athletes understood their experiences with racism, activism, and support) (Alreck & Settle, 2004; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Additionally, surveys are often used to gather insight into topics and experiences that are specific and familiar to the participants. As a white non-athlete

researcher, I did not have insight into the reality of the lived activism and support experiences of athletes, particularly the athletes of color. The survey allowed for the exploration of the various lived realities of athletes across the conference, especially through the open-ended response opportunities which enabled more extended discourse (Alreck & Settle, 2004). Reflexivity also occurred in the analysis as I considered what assumptions I brought to the data set via memoing and discussions with colleagues educated in CRT (Alreck & Settle, 2004; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Additionally, these discussions with colleagues about CRT and analyzing athletes' experiences continued through the conclusion of the project, particularly regarding implications.

## Results and Discussion

The results intertwine the three tenets of CRT, athletes' perceptions of support from athletics administrators and coaches, and the current literature on college athlete activism.

### *Experiences with Racism: Racism is Ordinary and Counter Storytelling*

To gather background on encounters with racism, athletes were asked: "Have you personally experienced racism while serving in your athlete role at your institution?" Nine athletes expressed encountering racism at their institution, while 91 said they had not. Such few athletes noting personal experiences with racism could be due to the mostly white sample of athletes. However, this does not mean racism was not an issue for some athletes, nor does it take away from the systemic nature of racism in sports. A Black football athlete highlighted CRT's tenet of racism being ordinary saying: "I'm disgusted at the systematic racism in our country, and afraid of encounters with any law enforcement due to my skin color." A Black men's track and field respondent added:

In personal experiences with coaches in the NCAA you feel as though you are treated as a pawn and that coaches own you. I've had to remind adults on multiple occasions that I am not a slave, they do not own me, and the language they use towards student-athletes of color is racism covered by a thin veil that they call "coaching."

A Black women's basketball athlete highlighted the normalcy of racial microaggressions she encountered and the ways in which Black athletes were treated differently than white athletes:

Our coach would make inappropriate remarks about our hair. He would treat the Black players as if they could handle things more than the Caucasian players and baby them and try to uplift them. But when it came to the Blacks we just had to figure it out ourselves.

While the athletes alluded to individual acts rooted in racial prejudice, rather than systemic racism, elements of their commentary do indicate embedded components of racism. For example, the Black women's basketball player stating that she and her Black teammates "had to figure it out for themselves" while white athletes received more direction, is a subtle but effective way for white coaches to promote the ideal of meritocracy while still favoring white athletes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hextrum, 2019). Additionally, the counter stories from the women's basketball and the men's track and field athletes highlight their blatant, everyday

experiences with the first tenet of CRT. Their reflections on reminding adults that they are not slaves and just figuring things out give credence to how ordinary racism is and how this ordinariness means it is challenging to cure (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Indeed, it may not be to the benefit of white coaches and athletes to cure systemic racism as doing so would take away some of their power and privilege (Edwards, 2017).

Finally, while she did not experience racism directly, a volleyball player noted ways in which her Black teammates encountered racism:

I am white. I have witnessed my Black teammates having their names forgotten, mispronounced, or othered by coaches at higher rates than my white peers. They have feared for their safety when traveling to Charlottesville and through other places in the South. They live through experiences every day through interactions with staff and faculty that reinforce white supremacy... I noted these observations as “experienced racism” not because they apply to me directly, but because the racism that is active on campus today hurts them, and thus hurts me and all of us.

This white athlete expressed a superficial understanding of racism, particularly on an individual level regarding her Black teammates, but failed to acknowledge the systemic nature of racism that CRT uncovers (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Because she is white, racism cannot hurt or alter her athletics experiences in the same ways it does the athletics experiences of her Black teammates. In fact, it is possible that this white volleyball player was a beneficiary of systemically racist policies and practices (e.g., special admissions) that enabled her to enroll in and compete for a Power 5 institution (Hextrum, 2019).

Previous scholarship demonstrates that racism is systemic across college campuses and athletics programs (Ofoegbu & Ekpe, 2022; Singer, 2019). Thus, as a first step to improve the experiences of athletes, particularly athletes of color, and further support this group’s engagement in activism through sport, athletics leaders must explicitly acknowledge that racism is endemic in athletics. For example, participants noted racist encounters often involved interactions of Black athletes with white coaches or administrators. These situations were experienced by athletes of color and observed by white athletes. However, white athletes did not say they stepped in as an ally to their teammates of color and challenge coaches involved in racist interactions. Doing so would work against systemic racism, but white athletes may not have felt comfortable stepping in or might have perceived such actions were risky due to potentially negative ramifications for themselves (Jolly et al., 2021; Raphael & Abercrombie, 2017). In this way, their “silence” serves as an accomplice to racism (Bryant, 2018). Thus, coach and administrator acknowledgment of systemic racism, at a minimum, may help white athletes also acknowledge the presence of systemic racism and assist them in offering allyship for athletes of color (Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022; Martin et al., 2022).

Additionally, athlete-coach/administrator cross-racial interactions are likely starting points for leaders to acknowledge and challenge racism. Improving the experiences of athletes of color begins by recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse leaders for positions as lack of representation of people of color in positions of power is an issue of systemic racism (Howe & Rockhill, 2020; Lapchick, 2020; Wright-Mair, 2021). In interviews with NCAA DEI officers, Wright-Mair and colleagues (2021) found that targeting and retaining diverse leaders demonstrated a commitment to athlete support, success, and overall wellbeing. Thus, it is likely that athletes noting microaggressions would not happen if athletes were interacting with a leader

of color. Fewer microaggressions may result in higher feelings of belonging for athletes of color (Gayles et al., 2018), which in turn, can lead to better athletic and academic performances (Stone et al., 2012; Wright-Mair, 2021). Thus, having diverse leaders may be key to challenging racism in sport, and therefore improving the experiences of athletes of color.

Some athletes of color found that white members of their inner circles did not believe racism was an issue on their teams, in their departments, or campuses. Such denials by white athletes and other athletics personnel continue to perpetuate systemic racism and perceptions of white superiority within the conference and in athletics. In challenging this, a few athletes of color ( $n = 4$ ) explicitly provided their own counter stories to white narratives. A Hispanic/Latinx softball player was taken aback by the fact that people were surprised that something like this incident could happen in America:

The fact that people were so shocked about it, particularly white people, just goes to show how little the white community is educated about the racism in our country. I'm frightened to engage with the police and so are my teammates of color. This is not something new since Floyd, but something we've been told to be cautious with all our lives.

This athlete's reflection on the "shock" expressed by white people around her further demonstrated the ordinariness of systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Shock may even be perceived as disbelief and disbelief about systemic racism makes this issue even more difficult to address in college athletics. A narrative from a Hispanic/Latinx women's cross country/track and field athlete highlighted the intersection of racism being ordinary with counter storytelling:

I feel stigmatized in many of my classes that I'm not smart enough because I'm not white, which is coupled with the fact that people think all athletes just get into college for athletics. So as athletes of color, we encounter racism and stereotypes regularly. One time another student was trying to joke with me and say how my race and the fact that I'm an athlete helped me get into college. In reality, I EARNED this spot. The joke is never funny.

Her statement also challenged the common myth of the "privileged" athlete who is unaffected by racism and other oppressive forces (Singer et al., 2017). Her narrative defied the stereotype of athletes and people of color being less intellectually capable than their non-athlete and white peers (Singer et al., 2017; Wiggins & Miller, 2003). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) take this even further noting that racial/intellectual stereotypes link people of color with words like "other" and "bad" (p. 29). These are similar to the stereotypes athletes encounter and combat daily (Stone et al., 2012). As with the Missouri football players' activism (Ferguson & Davis III, 2019), this cross country/track and field athlete made clear in her response that she was not just an athlete, but also a student and activist.

Similarly, a Black men's basketball athlete described how he challenged one of his white teammate's ideas on racism:

While my white teammate advocated that racism was not common on campus, me and my other Black teammates asked if he ever received glares or was made uncomfortable in

the school bookstore like we were (like we might steal something because we're Black). Or asked if he was afraid of the campus police simply because of the history of police brutality against his race. He was not.

The narratives of athletes of color help counter the status quo and challenge race-neutral or pro-white discourses and assumptions. This is particularly true when the counter stories are in direct opposition—like the example above—to white narratives (Feagin, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Potentially due to interest convergence, white athletes in this sample were silent when it came to potentially offering their own stories to challenge white dominance and systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Singer et al., 2017). Similarly, few athletes noted counter stories provided by their head coaches and administrators, which may demonstrate a lack of support for athletes of color generally, and in their activism specifically.

### *Activism and Commitment to Social Justice*

Many athletes felt called to action after Floyd's murder (Suddler, 2021). Fifty-eight athletes participated in activism to elicit change, showing a socially conscious motivation toward social justice (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). On the other hand, 24 athletes did not participate, and 18 athletes left this question blank. Generally, this sample of athletes took it upon themselves to find ways to engage in activism with some of the most prominent avenues including attending/hosting peaceful protests, posting on social media, having conversations about race/racism, and educating themselves further about social issues. One athlete noted that she not only went to multiple protests but also held her own. Another athlete even started their own social justice group on campus when they could not find an established organization.

Table 4

*In what ways did you engage in advocacy or activism to promote social and/or racial justice?*

Code	<i>n</i>	%
Attending/hosting protests/marches	31	66%
Posting on social media	23	49%
Having uncomfortable conversations	20	43%
Educating myself	10	21%
Donating to Black causes	9	19%
Signing petitions	7	15%
Educating others	7	15%
Kneeling for the Anthem	5	11%
Attempting to communicate with politicians	4	9%
Total responses	47	

*Note.* Fifty-eight athletes discussed participating in advocacy/activism, but only 47 provided specific examples.

Athletes and their platforms for social justice are best utilized when they have the support they need to elevate their voices and feel their voices are valued (Davis Brooks & Knox, 2022). Thus, knowing the ways in which athletes commit to social justice allows for practitioners in higher education and sports to form enhanced support systems and allyship networks for athlete-activists (Jolly et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2022), while also promoting the use of CRT in bolstering athlete activism (Agyemang et al., 2010).

A mixed-race athlete noted that she experienced a “sickness” after Floyd’s murder and the subsequent media reactions. This respondent noted that when she thinks about this case, “quiet rage fills [her] thoughts when [she] is alone” and that she “can’t stop thinking about and educating [herself] about the injustices of this country.” Emotions such as anger and the desire for enhanced education are often components for engagement in activism and a commitment to social justice (Edwards, 2017). This cultivates empowerment, which is connected to a commitment to social justice and sustained social justice efforts (Cooper et al., 2019; Yosso, 2005).

Athletes participating in activism demonstrated a commitment to social justice and the interdependence of such commitment (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Social justice does not happen when individuals work siloed. Indeed, Kaufman and Wolf (2010) contended that “victories for social justice and human rights have come about because of the collaborative efforts of individuals” (p. 168). These collaborative efforts are also modeled in successful and supportive sports programs. Thus, it is possible that the athletes above who committed to social justice saw collaboration and support from their peers, coaches, administrators, and others on campus as they took on these efforts.

Additionally, of the athletes who engaged in activism, 40% ( $n = 23$ ) were athletes of color, which is almost all of the athletes of color in this sample. This may demonstrate the importance of activism as a means to challenge issues of systemic racism for athletes of color (Agyemang et al., 2010; Cooper et al., 2019), compared to white athletes. For example, four athletes—three white and one without a racial identification—did not participate in activism, believing that the attention provided to the murder was unwarranted. A white men’s cross country athlete voiced that “the evidence is scanty that the police murdered him. It’s an unfortunate circumstance but I feel worse that our law enforcement agencies across the country have been devastated in the previous months.” This perspective also intersects with the other CRT tenets as it maintains the ordinariness racism through promoting white dominance while negating the counter narratives of the athletes of color who have lived experiences contrary to this athlete’s statement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Singer et al., 2017).

### *Athlete Perceptions of Administrator Support*

To gather information about athletes’ perceptions of support from administrators, they were first asked if their athletics department released a statement about social and/or racial justice after Floyd’s murder. Releasing a statement is one small way athletics departments and individuals could have shown support for athletes activists after Floyd’s murder (Ofoegbu & Ekpe, 2022). Six athletes said their department did not release a statement, 46 selected “yes, but it took some time,” 27 selected “yes, immediately after the incident,” and 21 athletes were not sure if their athletics department administrators released a statement.

In statements released after the murder of Floyd, research by Ofoegbu and Ekpe (2022) demonstrated that leaders often avoided strong, what some stakeholders might see as



controversial terms, like “murder” or “racism.” This failed to acknowledge the systemic nature of racism and allowed for the “erasure of the harmful and systemic damage” caused by the murder (Ofoegbu & Ekpe, 2022, p. 182). Acknowledging that racism exists is a critical first step in systematic transformation and support and fosters buy-in from various groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Wright-Mair et al., 2021). In failing to acknowledge the first tenet of CRT and their power in perpetuating systemic racism and oppression, it can be argued that athletics administrators and coaches did not fully support their athletes of color or their activist endeavors.

Next, athletes were asked to discuss the ways in which they saw administrators engage in activism and commit to social justice. The most common response was that administrators hosted discussions or meetings to facilitate communication about the importance of social justice. A white women’s soccer player stated: “I thought they created a space for discussion within the athletic department as well as encouraged student-athletes to get involved in whatever ways they felt comfortable doing.” Race-centric discussions support previous scholarship noting that discussions/summits offer educational opportunities for athletes across various backgrounds to engage with and learn from one another (Comeaux & Fuentes, 2015; Davis Brooks & Knox, 2022). Adding to the positive narratives about administrator action, a mixed-race women’s lacrosse athlete expressed that “the response from our AD was incredible and [they] demanded that we all at the very least become aware of the dark history that surrounds our school.”

The next most common ways athletes saw their administrators get involved included sending out emails and educational materials, posting on social media, directly encouraging athletes to engage in reforms, and attending/organizing protests and marches. Actions athletes saw administrators engage with the least included voting discussions, providing a moment of silence, and kneeling during the national anthem. With this, some athletes did perceive a lack of support from administrators. For example, a Black men’s track and field athlete who did not know of the avenues administrators pursued claimed: “... it definitely wasn’t enough if I’m unaware of the steps they took. Individual athletes were the ones to take over the movement. My team as a whole as well as coaches and administrators have done nothing.”

When asked about the ways in which athletic administrators supported their activism through sport, athletes most commonly stated that the department allowed them to engage in activism without silencing their voices. Highlighting this notion, one football player said he felt most supported because the administration was “not controlling what we say,” while a mixed-race woman’s lacrosse player stated: “We did not feel as though we would be punished for supporting BLM.” However, these athletes did not unpack that this notion of athletic administrators *letting* them participate in activism maintains systems of power, such as white paternalism, while perpetuating systemic racism (Hawkins et al., 2015).

Highlighting the importance of social media during this activism wave (Cooper et al, 2019; Edwards, 2016), a Black women’s track and field/cross country athlete stated that she felt supported when the athletics department shared a poem she wrote about racial injustice on the athletics department’s Instagram. Still, other athletes found that their administrators assisted their justice-oriented endeavors through educational resources, verbal support, physical support, and establishing a safe, respectful environment. A white volleyball athlete noted she “felt valued as a person, not just an athlete, so I always felt comfortable speaking up and taking steps deeper to educate myself.”

Table 5

*In What Ways Did Your Athletic Department Administrators and Head Coaches Engage in Advocacy or Activism to Promote Social and/or Racial Justice?*

Code	Administrator		Head Coach	
	(n)	%	(n)	%
Hosting discussions/meetings/summits	15	32%	25	53%
Sending out emails/providing educational resources	14	30%	6	13%
Posting on social media	12	26%	6	13%
Directly spoke to athletes to encourage the fight for social and/or racial justice	9	19%		
Making a statement to the team			9	19%
Attending/organizing protests and marches	8	17%	3	6%
The leadership did not do enough			7	15%
Providing t-shirts and other gear with justice-oriented statements	5	11%	3	6%
Implementing new social and/or racial justice programming	5	11%		
I don't know	4	9%	4	9%
Checking in with the team			3	6%
Continuing/Establishing a book club			3	6%
Discussing the importance of voting	1	2%	1	2%
Kneeling	1	2%	1	2%
Providing a moment of silence	1	2%	1	2%
Total responses	47		47	

*Athlete Perceptions of Head Coach Support*

Athletes were also asked to discuss if their head coach released a statement about social and/or racial justice. Almost one third of the athletes in this sample ( $n = 31$ , 31%) selected “yes, immediately after the incident” while 24 athletes selected “yes, but it took some time. Sixteen respondents said their head coach did not release a statement following the murder of Floyd and 29 were not sure if their coach took any action.

When asked how their head coaches engaged in activism after the murder of George Floyd, over half of the athletes who completed this question said their coach hosted discussions and team meetings to talk about racism, white privilege, and inequality. A white women’s lacrosse athlete noted that her head coach “immediately scheduled a zoom meeting with the team to talk to us and to show her support.” The next most popular responses athletes saw head coaches take included making a statement to their team, sending out emails and educational documents and links, and posting to their social media accounts. In this vein, a Black women’s

Table 6

*How Did Your Athletic Department Administrators and Head Coach Support You in Your Advocacy and Activism for Social and/or Racial Justice?*

Code	Administrator		Head Coach	
	(n)	%	(n)	%
Allowing athletes to engage in advocacy/activism	10	23%	8	19%
Leadership did nothing			9	21%
Providing educational resources	7	16%	4	9%
Offering verbal support	7	16%	12	28%
Offering physical support	6	14%		
Promoting athlete activism on social media	5	12%		
Creating a safe, respectful environment	4	9%	8	19%
Helping athletes organize justice-oriented events	3	7%	2	5%
I don't know			3	7%
Checking in on athletes	2	5%	1	2%
Allowing the day off to vote	2	5%	2	5%
Offering more psychological resources	2	5%		
Total Responses	43		43	

soccer player expressed that her “head coach was a leader in his efforts to support racial justice. I just wish he and the athletics department encouraged other head coaches to follow suit.”

However, seven athletes said that their coaches did not do enough, while four stated they were unaware of social justice actions or support by their head coaches. Some respondents noted that their head coaches did “nothing” and one white women’s swimming and diving athlete said that her head coach “never brought it up, told us not to post anything on social media.” Similarly, a mixed-race men’s basketball athlete stated his coach assisted in creating a video for social media, however, “... it did not address anything head-on. It was a very politically safe message and by that, I mean, we did not once say anything about racism, systemic racism, or police brutality.” See Table 6 for more information about head coach engagement in activism.

Athletes also reflected on their perceptions about how their head coaches supported their activism. A little over ¼ of the respondents said their coaches provided verbal support, followed by allowing athletes to engage with such causes, cultivating a safe/respectful environment, and providing educational information/resources. Highlighting this educational support piece, a Black volleyball player stated that her head coach offered her “resources to cope and provided a helping hand in the days leading to the protest on campus.” Additionally, a Black football player said that his coach “talked to the black teammates and told us he see[s] and hear[s] us,” while a Black woman’s soccer athlete noted a shift in team rules because of the coach: “Our head coach was very vocal about his support for our advocacy and activism, and we also added a statement about antiracism in our team’s core values.” Still, 21% ( $n = 9$ ) of the athletes in the sample said

that their coaches did “nothing” to support their engagement in social and/or racial justice causes or expressed disappointment in the lack of action taken by their head coaches.

To conclude the survey, respondents were asked about the ways in which athletic administrators and head coaches could have better supported their activism. Just over ¼ of the athletes who answered this question wanted their department to continue to show direct support for activism. One athlete advocated that continued departmental support can ensure that these events have a lasting positive impact and are not just “a one-time ordeal.” A white woman’s lacrosse player noted that her department must “keep the momentum going and continue to show support as it seems to dwindle as time passes, even though the problem is still here.” Others perceived that the athletics department did a good job in supporting athletes and that there was nothing more the department could have provided.

As with the sample noting few experiences with racism, this finding of strong support could stem from the fact that the majority of athletes in this study identified as white and are also surrounded by predominantly white administrators and coaches (Lapchick, 2020; NCAA demographic databased, n.d.). Thus, it would be rational that they might feel comfortable and supported by the actions as they are less likely to encounter systemic racism and potentially desire less drastic social justice changes.

Still, many athletes expressed a desire for more support from their administrators and head coaches. For example, a mixed-race men’s basketball player said:

I would have personally liked to see more talks directly about the issues in our society without beating around the bush as an entire athletic department. I would have liked to see some sort of structure to establish ways to help and get involved in the community.

Similarly, a Black men’s track and field athlete noted the ways in which he and his activist peers could have been better supported:

They could’ve organized protests within the athletic community. They will use covid as an excuse to why they didn’t take action but it’s okay. Student-athletes are very aware of who is at the top and how the bottom line dictates how they treat us. The NCAA is a representation of modern day slavery and there is no other way to put it.

Finally, other athletes wanted the administrators and coaches to “use their power” to enact changes in legislation at the NCAA and societal levels. Such demands support the use of CRT as they highlight the interdependency quality of activism and CRT from previous scholarship noting that it takes collaboration across groups for objectives to be accomplished and sustained (Bell, 1995; Cooper et al., 2020; Edwards, 2017; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Unfortunately, a Black woman’s track and field athlete reflected on a time her and other athletes met with the AD: “... we asked [them] some questions regarding [their] slow and almost lack of response to the incidents that were occurring. [They] did not answer our questions fully and didn’t seem to really support the BLM movement.”

## Practical Implications

Through CRT, this research examined athletes' experiences and perceptions of support as they engaged in activism through sport. Athletes' perceptions of support are critical: The more athletes feel supported and see support from administrators and coaches, the more likely they are to participate in activism (Davis Brooks & Knox, 2022; Kluch, 2020; Martin et al., 2022). Additionally, increased support could result in heightened feelings of trust and respect, which are crucial in developing athletes holistically and preparing them for life after sport participation and continued activism (Kluch, 2020; Weight et al., 2020). As such, these findings offer significant contributions to the field of sport management. Practical implications for enhanced athlete activism support are discussed next through the lens of CRT.

Despite the current fourth wave of athlete activism gaining momentum, systemic racism remains problematic in athletics spaces (Cooper et al., 2019; Edwards, 2017; Ferguson & Davis III, 2019; McKnight, 2020). Thus, it is critical for athletics administrators and coaches to acknowledge the existence and ordinariness of racism as a first step in dismantling white dominance in college sports. In offering improved support of athlete-activists, particularly athletes of color, leaders must listen to their counter narratives, which lends further support for CRT in studying this phenomenon (Agyemang et al., 2010). These counter stories can be powerful building blocks for future discussions about racism in athletics, and in this way, athletes' counter stories are their activism (Comeaux & Fuentes, 2015; Kluch, 2020; Singer, 2019).

DEI work that builds off counter narratives will elevate athlete voices, recognize the prevalence of systemic racism in sports (not just individual acts rooted in racial prejudice), and build an anti-racist community (Bell, 1995; Cooper et al., 2020). From here, athletes, coaches, administrators, and others can collaborate to create more equity-centric approaches in athletics, shifting the power dynamics so that athletes, especially Black athletes and other athletes of color, become partners with actors who have traditionally exercised power over them (Bell, 2016; Cooper et al., 2020; Raphael & Abercrombie, 2017).

Similarly, education for athletes, coaches, and administrators, especially those who identify as white, is critical in addressing systemic racism, acknowledging the first tenet of CRT, and dismantling white power structures in athletics (Agyemang et al., 2010; Bell, 1995; Hextrum, 2019; Wright-Mair, 2021). Many administrators and coaches did offer educational opportunities. However, some white athletes still perpetuated white supremacist ideology, arguing Floyd was not murdered. These expressions highlight the strength of systemic racism (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Edwards, 2017; Singer et al., 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Thus, more education is needed and might be particularly significant for white athletes (Bell, 2016). Such DEI programming can challenge racial innocence and protection can be dismantled, whiteness disrupted, and privilege challenged by both communities of color and whites (Bergerson, 2003; Hextrum, 2019).

In a similar vein, athletes stated administrators and coaches mostly hosted seminars rather than engaging in them as well. With athletes desiring meaningful improvements in social justice, leaders must offer further support by participating in education/training, and thus, committing more to activism and demonstrating stronger social justice orientations (Cooper et al., 2019). This creates a more open dialogue that can facilitate tighter athlete-coach/administrator bonds, potentially through enhanced sharing of counter stories across these groups of actors, or through co-participation in activist endeavors (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). This bolsters findings from

previous studies: Athletes want support, but do not perceive as much support from social actors in the athletics department. This happens despite the fact that these people are significant forces in their understanding of and desire to participate in activism (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018; Martin et al., 2022). When athletes see leaders “doing the work” they form more trusting relationships with them (Wright-Mair et al., 2021, p. 612). Stronger relationships means more support and may lead to more positive experiences of activism through sport (Bunch & Cianfrone, 2022; Kluch, 2020; Martin et al., 2022).

From this, a main recommendation from this study is for athletics leaders to demonstrate increased/continued allyship with athletes (Davis Brooks & Knox, 2022; Kluch, 2020). Considering historical structures of American society, often times, white people in positions of power receive more credibility and attention when discussing societal issues (Bryant, 2018; Coombs et al., 2019). Thus, if white administrators and head coaches actively demonstrate support for athletes, issues of systemic racism may receive increased attention and result in more improvements for people of color in sports. Literature addressing allyship contends that allies take on the struggle of racism as their own and stand up when racism, oppression, and aggression occur (Bryant, 2018).

For example, in interviews with Black female athlete-activists, Davis Brooks and Knox (2022) found athletes perceived the best allies did three key things: (1) got to know them, (2) pursued education regarding systemic inequalities, and (3) amplified athlete voices. Similarly, Jolly and colleagues (2021) proposed the idea of transformational allyship done through proactive activism and risk taking on the part of athletics leaders. Proactive allyship as activism is more disruptive and critical of systemic compared to other forms of allyship that “fall short of being transformational resistance” (Jolly et al., 2021, p. 11). In this way, white allies, exercise individual and institutionalized power to elicit social justice improvements. These actors must be intentional in challenging racism, centering the voices of athletes of color, and reflecting on their power in order to directly disrupt systems in sports that maintain white dominance (Jolly et al., 2020).

By trying to dismantle systemic racism, valuing counter narratives, and participating in allyship as activism, athletics leaders demonstrate enhanced support for athlete-activists and a stronger commitment to social justice (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Jolly et al., 2021).

Finally, with athletes committing to social justice by protesting, posting on social media, and engaging in conversations about racism, leaders can offer additional platforms for athletes to engage in. By knowing how important protesting is for athletes, an athletics department could arrange an annual march to allow athletes to continue to showcase this symbolic activism. Media and marketing departments could do a social activism “blitz” on social media, encouraging athletes to post about social justice on their media accounts. This “blitz” could also use team accounts or social media platforms for the athletics department or institution as a whole. Additionally, an athletics department could arrange for a social justice night at various sporting events to highlight activism through sport (Cooper et al., 2019). Athletes could adorn messages on their uniforms or arm bands that are important to them and announcements about racial equality could be broadcasted throughout the games. Finally, attendees could be encouraged to donate to a justice cause during the event, fostering more economic activism on the part of the athletics programs and fans. If athletics administrators and coaches want to support athletes and engage in transformational and proactive allyship, collective actions such as the above may help in challenging systemic racism in athletics (Cooper et al., 2020). Additionally, these are actions

that athletes in the sample wanted their leaders to take in order to engage in activism beyond individual levels and up to institutional levels (Jolly et al., 2021).

The proposed implications above can demonstrate administrator and coach acknowledgement of social justice in sports, while showing athletes that the leadership cares about what is important to them. This can assist in improving the experiences of athletes, particularly athletes of color, and those who wish to further engage in activism through sport.

### Conclusion

This study addressed athletes' perceptions of activism support, an area that is currently under-examined in the literature. Generally, athletes in this sample engaged in various forms of activism and perceived good support from administrators and coaches. Still, this may be due to the mostly white sample of survey participants, a limitation of this study. Indeed, white athletes may have felt more supported and therefore more able to participate in activism, or performative activism. This likely stems from the power structures in sport that generally provide more support for white athletes and the fact that coaches and administrators around them are predominantly white (Lapchick, 2020).

More in-depth research using interviews or focus groups with athlete-activists would also advance this area of research. The next wave of college athlete activism research should seek to recruit a diverse sample of athletes—in surveys, interviews, or focus groups—to understand if support levels differ when the athletes do not mostly identify as white. Such active recruitment of diverse athletes may work to dismantle white dominance in athletics, while also demonstrating intentional and increased support for athletes from historically marginalized groups. Similarly, nuance to the activism support conversation could be added by understanding if athletics leaders support certain kinds of activism (e.g., performative activism) over others (e.g., protests, kneeling for the national anthem, etc.).

This research also centered CRT in understanding and improving support for athletes engaged in activism through sport. Administrators and coaches can use CRT, specifically the tenets of racism being ordinary, counter narratives, and commitment to social justice, to advance support for athlete-activists (Agyemang et al., 2010; Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Singer et al., 2017). With advanced support and understanding of the ways athletes want to be supported in their activism, athletics may begin to see another wave of activism. This can facilitate further conversations on social and/or racial justice, limiting silence in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

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