



McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight

Antiracism or Bust: The Survival of Sport Business is Dependent on a Cultural Shift

By Nefertiti A. Walker and Kwame Agyemang
June 2020

We are in the midst of a movement, unlike anything we have seen in recent history. The Summer of 2020 was met with the spreading of [COVID-19](#), many people and firms on the precipice of [financial ruin](#), and [weeks of protests against anti-Black racism and violence](#). At the heart of these crises, is sports. The [NBA led the way](#), in dutifully shutting down the league, after the positive test of [Rudy Gobert](#) of the Utah Jazz and subsequently, his teammate, Donovan Mitchell. Soon after, other leagues followed the NBA's lead. Although just in the midst of the [first wave of this virus](#), the sports world is contemplating reopening. There are certainly important public health considerations against reopening. There are financial considerations in support of reopening. But for Summer 2020, at the center of the reopening conversation for leagues such as the NWSL, WNBA, and NBA, are the social implications of their sports distracting society from the antiracism movement that is at the forefront of our consciousness.

Professional Athletes are Demanding Change

Sports media outlets are consumed with professional athletes, demanding that leagues and teams support the antiracism movement. Multiple players from both the [NWSL](#), [WNBA](#), and [NBA](#) have elected to sit out the condensed 2020 season, instead focusing their attention on social justice actions. Sport and Race experts such as [Richard Lapchick](#), and the great [Bill Russell](#), have both said that they have never seen so many athletes, so deeply engaged in social justice. So, what does this mean for sport business? Sport businesses that do not promote, represent, and live an antiracism ethos, may not survive this moment. Professional athletes, and even [college athletes](#), have begun to demand more BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) on the executive team, as well as on the operations side of teams and leagues. We have seen celebrities like [Beyoncé](#) wield their power, influence, and take their money elsewhere when not presented with diverse creative or talent management teams. Brands, agencies, teams, and leagues can expect the same to begin happening in sport business. In the recent [WNBA negotiations](#) for the truncated 2020 season, players adamantly lobbied for social justice content to be included in game day production plans and monetary donations made to organizations in alignment with Black Lives Matter. [Kyrie Irving](#) has expressed concern over the return to play being a distraction to the social justice movement, and other athletes have suggested that if the league does not center the BLM movement, then they will not play.

Antiracism Approach to Business

This is all to say that organizations must begin thinking about how they can undo systemic racism and move towards a culture rooted in antiracism. They cannot wait for the next Kyrie Irving, or Megan Rapinoe, to refuse to sign with their brand, or refuse to endorse their product.

Here are five ways organizations can move towards a culture of antiracism:

1. **Hire professional diversity, equity, and inclusion managers**, to ensure you have a robust human-centered diversity, equity, and inclusion program, rooted in antiracism.
2. **Convene an antiracism council**. Executive leadership must be a part of this council. Anonymity and/or confidentiality of feedback and data must be encouraged.

3. **Examine, interrogate, and measure culture.** More often than not, your culture is what is allowing racism to persist right under your nose. Therefore, you must intentionally examine your culture, interrogate and question why things are the way they are, and measure the impact of this culture on your employees.
4. **Reward, incentivize, and penalize employees.** This change will be hard for many, but there is a strong moral case and [strong business case](#) for becoming a diverse, equitable, and inclusive sport business, rooted in antiracism.

The antiracism, Black Lives Matter social justice movement is here. Its impact can be felt across the globe. Teams in [Europe](#) are kneeling in solidarity – displaying the expansiveness of the global movement. Sport business is at a nexus, either live an antiracist ethos – including embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion as an important part of the core mission – or bust.

Walker is an Associate Professor in the Mark H. McCormack Department of Sport Management in the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst as well as the university's Interim Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer. Agyemang is an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University.

This *McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight* is part of a broader collection of sport management research spotlights that seek to positively impact the commercial, cultural and organizational success of global sport management stakeholders in the future. View the entire Spotlight collection at www.mccormackcenter.com/spotlight

The *McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight* series is supported by the *McCormack Center for Sport Research & Education* within UMass Amherst's Isenberg School of Management. The Center creates innovative and scalable revenue-generating programs that help companies, students, managers, and academic institutions differentiate in the crowded sports marketplace. The Center creates value through collaboration, and furthers the educational mission of sport management as a discipline. View Center activity [here](#).