

THE BIGOT IN THE STANDS, AND OTHER STORIES

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When a Washington [Football Team] player this fall complained that some fans shouted the n-word at him during a game in Kansas City, some big things happened quickly. The media swarmed the story, the controversy went viral, and the NFL began an investigation. But one thing didn't result: Almost no one asked if Kansas City is a racist place.

In Detroit, a Lions fan used that same slur against black fans in a Snapchat post during a game —yet news coverage did not frame Detroit as a bigoted city.

And in Pittsburgh, a local fire chief became angry over the Steelers' participation this year in the national anthem protests. He posted to Facebook degrading comments, including the n-word, about the team's head coach, who is black. A brief anger followed, the chief resigned, and that pretty much was the end of it. Boston is different. But you knew that.

When a Sox fan at Fenway hurled a racial slur at Baltimore Orioles center fielder Adam Jones, the racist city question wasn't just raised —it had already been answered. And the answer for many, especially those who don't live here, was: “Of course”.

That image of Boston, in sports as in so much else, is part of our brand. How do we know? Just take a look at the national media coverage.

The Globe Spotlight Team, as part of its investigation of Boston's image as a place unwelcoming to blacks, looked at the role of sports here in supporting this reputation. Reporters studied, among other things, 25 years of local coverage in cities across the country, looking for cases of racial taunts directed at players by fans that were reported in the press. Boston easily had the most incidents, even though the numbers are small. In this long stretch of sports history, eight players in the major professional sports told the media they had been targets of racial slurs from Boston-area fans, compared to five in Chicago and no more than one each in 14 other cities, including New York and Los Angeles.

The total very likely undercounted the number of incidents; a search for old articles is an imperfect process, and black athletes often say nothing in such shocking moments, because they don't want to be dragged into a public controversy. None of the current Red Sox (2017), for example, were willing to talk to the Globe about race, though, privately, some players have said that they have heard fans use the n-word in their home ballpark.

We not only have more stories, but ours are often presented as part of Boston's seemingly well known racist legacy, especially in the national press.

Time magazine's headline after the Jones incident read, “Why Boston's Sports Teams Can't Escape the City's Racism.” The Christian Science Monitor's piece was titled “Racist taunts at Fenway bring up Boston's ugly sports past.” And a former baseball player wrote in The New York Times op-ed piece, “Of course —Boston.” But even if the numbers are small, here as everywhere, the pattern is telling. So is the way racial

incidents are covered in other cities compared to what always seems to happen here: One bigot in the stands lets his racism spew, and we all own it. We do.

1. Over the last 25 years, how many examples of racial taunts have been identified by athletes in Boston and reported by the media?
 - a. How does it compare to other cities?
 - b. Do you think that is a large number?

PASSION STARTS THE FIRE

There is a reason for that: History. History written outside the stadiums —like the stones pelting school buses full of frightened minority children during the desegregation crisis of the 1970s, which told a national TV audience that Bostonians are not all the progressive liberals we think ourselves to be. Or the famous Charles Stuart murder case, covered world wide in 1989, when much of the city believed Stuart's terrible claim that a black man killed his pregnant wife when it was really Stuart himself, a white man.

And then there is the history written inside the sports arenas where Boston's hyper-competitive fans celebrate their heroes and shame their losers, sometimes in intensely personal ways.

Boston “is a tough place for everybody. It's especially a tough place for black players,” said Howard Bryant, author of *Shut Out: A Story of Race and Baseball in Boston*. It's a reality he attributes partly to the intensity of Boston fans.

“When I say there's 'passion,' I'm not saying that as a compliment necessarily,” Bryant said. “If you're going to lose your mind over the ninth game of the season, in April, is that a good thing? Is a 'crime of passion' a good thing? They take it as a compliment, when it's really a condition.”

Nowhere is that passion more on display than on the city's two sports radio stations, where hosts and callers endlessly debate last night's game as well as bigger issues. The hosts of WEEI's “Kirk & Callahan,” the morning show in the city with the largest audience, have been targeted by critics for their frequent digressions into right leaning politics and racial issues. They have raised doubts about racism in the sports world and mocked efforts to address racism.

Our city's passion has helped Boston's sports teams by keeping stadiums full even with some of the highest ticket prices in the country. The resulting money allows owners to consistently sign top talent, but it also leads to unrealistic expectations by fans —who can be cruel when players fail to live up to the hype. Star pitcher David Price, sent to the bullpen this year after an arm injury, said he was called the n-word by fans.

Such complaints by players are swiftly added to our city's known story of prejudice, dating back to the 1950s, when the Red Sox were the last major league team to include a black player.

This year's Adam Jones incident, to cite just one, also generated vastly more coverage than similar cases in other towns. A Google News search of the Jones case on Oct. 26 found nearly 21,100 articles, from local

and national outlets, reporting about the case. This year's accounts of racial slurs from fans in Kansas City, Pittsburgh, and Detroit generated about 1,900 articles each.

"We (the Red Sox) have a very unfortunate history as does Boston with respect to race relations," said Red Sox CEO Kennedy. "That's deserved and that reputation has been there, so that's not going to change." In fact, one researcher said that Boston's racial past is so awful that, for many, it may warp people's perception of what actually happens here every day.

"There are some things that are so ingrained in cultural memory that it becomes very difficult to change that imagery, even when you become relatively progressive," said Harry Edwards, a sociologist who has long studied the connections between race and sports at the University of California Berkeley. Still, some aim to try.

In the wake of the Adam Jones furor, all five of the major Boston sports franchises announced that they would join together in an antiracism campaign called "Take the Lead." Nothing like it has ever happened elsewhere. But Boston is different. It has to be. You knew that.

2. What detail(s) of Red Sox history supports the fact that the team has a long and ugly history with racism?

CITY OF CHAMPIONS

The Red Sox' 86 years of World Series failure —ended at last in 2004 — hid the fact that Boston professional sports teams have been among the most successful ever. Boston, the nation's 10th largest metro area, holds more professional sports championships —37 —than any other city except the nation's largest, New York, which has 54, almost half of them courtesy of the Yankees. Other large cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago can only envy Boston's success.

But sustained excellence is expensive. Boston teams often have among the highest payrolls in their leagues and feature some of the highest-paid individual athletes in the world. In June, four Boston athletes made Forbes' list of the world's highest-paid athletes: David Price of the Red Sox (\$30.6 million); Stephen

Gilmore of the Patriots (\$29.3 million); Al Horford of the Celtics (\$28.1 million); and Hanley Ramirez of the Sox (\$22.3 million). All four are black, as it happens, though since that list came out, Gordon Hayward, who is white, supplanted Horford as the highest-paid Celtic.



Four Boston sports figures made the annual Forbes magazine list of the world's highest-paid athletes. Clockwise: David Price of the Red Sox; Stephen Gilmore of the Patriots; Hanley Ramirez of the Red Sox; Al Horford of the Celtics.

The fans, directly and indirectly, pay for these huge payrolls, which helps explain why Boston ticket prices are so high. A CBS News survey in 2016 found that a night at Fenway Park for two

—including two tickets, two beers, two hot dogs, and parking—is by far the most expensive of any major league ballpark, costing \$157, more than double the league average. Beyond the image issue, then, price is a barrier to inclusion.

Such an expensive day at the park is usually beyond the reach of lower-income people around Boston, too many of whom are black. The Spotlight Team found that blacks accounted for less than 2% of the Fenway Park crowd at the Aug. 16 game against the St. Louis Cardinals.

At Gillette Stadium, the fourth-most expensive stadium to visit in the NFL (\$331.96 for two), black turnout was not much higher. The Globe found that blacks made up about 2% of the audience at the Sept. 24 game against the Houston Texans. At the TD Garden, during a Bruins game late last month, out of more than 2,000 spectators counted, just 1% were black.

The crowd, however, is noticeably more diverse when the Celtics play, at least by Boston standards. A Globe survey found that about 8 percent of the TD Garden audience was black at the Celtics home opener in October. That's about the same as the percentage of blacks in the metropolitan area, but just one-third the proportion of blacks who live in Boston itself, and this to cheer on a team that currently fields five black starters.

Former Celtic Cedric Maxwell, now a radio host, believes that the somewhat larger number of blacks in the crowd at Celtics games helps explain why there are fewer incidents of racial taunting there. White people are simply less likely to say something racist if there are black people sitting near them, he figures. "There are a lot of people of color there," he said. "So you're not going to hear what you would probably hear at a baseball game where you don't have a lot of people of color."

3. How does the high cost of talent (most of whom are men of color) actually cause the lack of diversity at stadiums?

a. Identify some statistics to prove this lack of diversity.

b. According to Cedrick Maxwell, how could more diversity in the stands help limit the number of racially motivated incidents?

The scant diversity of crowds at most games raises an uncomfortable question: What does it mean to be a city of champions if a vast portion of your city doesn't feel like part of it? That question could be asked in other places, but it feels loudest here, one more emblem or reminder of the city's racial story.

BREAKING THE COLOR BARRIER

Bill Russell once called Boston "a flea market of racism." He had reason. In the Celtics team picture from 1957, Russell is both the tallest player and the only black one. The rookie had a lot to be proud of that year in the NBA, helping to lead the team to its first-ever championship and launching an era in which the Celtics would dominate basketball as no NBA team had ever or probably will ever do. Eleven titles in 13 years.

But even as Russell was on his way to becoming Boston's first black superstar and the NBA's first black coach, he faced both crude racism and profound isolation. When he came here, no other Boston sports franchise had a single black player, though Willie O'Ree, the first black player in the NHL, would play his first game for the Bruins in 1958. And for a black athlete in Boston, like almost anywhere in America before the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, there was no escape from racism.

"I was the only black player on the Boston Celtics, and I was excluded from almost everything except practice and the games," Russell recalled of his rookie year in his 1979 memoir, "Second Wind." And there was nothing subtle about that era's prejudice.

In 1959, when the Red Sox famously became the last Major League Baseball team to add an African-American player, Pumpsie Green, he could not stay with the rest of the team during spring training because the Safari Hotel in Scottsdale, Ariz., didn't accept black guests. The team bowed to the cruel rules of Jim Crow.

In time, Russell came to love his teammates and especially coach Red Auerbach, but his relationship with the fans of Boston could be cool. He steadfastly refused to sign autographs, for one thing, and made it clear he did not care what fans thought of him.

Years later, Russell and his family faced far worse when they returned to their Reading home one night to find that someone had smashed Russell's prized trophy case, poured beer on his pool table, and spray-painted the n-word on the walls.

Cedric Maxwell joined the Celtics as a player during another deeply painful time in Boston history: in the 1970s, soon after a federal judge ordered busing to desegregate the schools. Violence erupted across the city—and the nation saw unforgettable images of a divided Boston. The city's iconic places didn't feel welcoming to people like him. "I walked out of the Parker House and I went to Boston Common, where there were no black people at that time," he recalled. "I was like, 'Wow, what kind of park can you be in that you don't see people of color?'"

The Celtics team of Maxwell's era would also be defined by their war with the Los Angeles Lakers, and those battles were often viewed through a racial lens. The Lakers were loaded with black stars, including Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The Celtics were most closely identified with two white stars, Larry Bird and Kevin McHale.

To this day, the Larry-Magic rivalry —which began when they met for an NCAA title in 1979 and led to three epic showdowns for the NBA championship —is widely credited with reviving interest in the NBA, a league that was beginning to lose its white fan base in the 1970s, as white superstars became scarce.

But there was no getting around one important fact: The Lakers were the team that many African-Americans in Boston rooted for, while the Celtics had the support of most local white fans. Maxwell and his black teammates felt that racial tension, though he says they never discussed it. “I knew how proud I was of my blackness,” Maxwell said. “I knew how proud Robert Parish was of his blackness. But you were thrown into something that was bigger than you when you played in that particular series. The Lakers were a black team, so it was black versus white. That perception was always there.”

There are signs of hope in the city. Red Sox (and Boston Globe) owner John Henry wants to persuade the city to eliminate a unique reminder of the city's racial past, the name of Yawkey Way outside of Fenway Park. It pays homage to former Sox owner Tom Yawkey, who kept his team all white longer than anyone else, passing up chances to hire future Hall of Famers Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays along the way. No other professional sports franchise plays near a street named for such a racially divisive figure.¹

Boston has had a number of enormously popular black athletes over the last 25 years from Jim Rice to Kevin Garnett, at least some of whom adored playing in Boston. Celtics star Isaiah Thomas even penned a lengthy “love letter to Boston,” expressing gratitude to the city when he was unceremoniously traded to Cleveland last summer. He said Boston's “winning culture” helped make him a better player. “So when I say this hurts, man —just know that it isn't because of anything anyone else did. It's only because of something I did,” Thomas said. “I fell in love with Boston.”

But how far have we really come?

After all, one of the most glaring examples of racism in Boston sports was only five years ago: angry Boston Bruins fans targeted African-American hockey star Joel Ward of the Washington Capitals with dozens of blatantly racist tweets after he scored the winning goal in a playoff game against the Bruins. Yet, plenty of people in Boston think the racial tensions are exaggerated and some accounts even made up. When Orioles outfielder Jones said he had been called the n-word, some people, including WEEI hosts, suggested Jones may have made it up. “All I'm saying is I've watched journalists report this with zero proof and (crap) all over Boston again,” wrote Kirk Minihane on a Twitter posting in early May.

But the broader public response to the Jones incident was encouraging —a sign that maybe, just maybe, Boston is finally willing to come to terms with not just its history, but its present. Among the responses, the top executives of our city's sports teams created public service announcements aimed at curbing offensive and racist fan behavior, featuring such notable athletes as Dustin Pedroia, Mookie Betts, Devin McCourty, Patrice Bergeron, and Marcus Smart. That wouldn't have happened in Bill Russell's day.

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¹ Yawkey Way was renamed Jersey Street in May 2018.

