
Ronald Bishop

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It Hurts the Team Even More


RONALD BISHOP

A textual analysis was conducted of newspaper articles written in the late summer of 2004 about the contract holdouts of quarterback Philip Rivers of the San Diego Chargers, who is white, and Kellen Winslow II, a tight end who plays for the Cleveland Browns. Winslow is African-American. Articles were written by sports journalists assigned to regularly cover the teams, as well as columnists for those news organizations. Journalists writing for Cleveland news organizations emasculated Winslow, treating him like a moody adolescent incapable of making significant decisions on his own. Any athlete takes a risk by confronting management, but this research suggests the risk is heightened for African-American athletes.

Introduction

Early in the 2004–2005 NBA season, veteran player Latrell Sprewell demanded a contract extension from the Minnesota Timberwolves, his third NBA team. His time in the NBA was repeatedly marked by controversy, including a 1997 confrontation with his then coach, P.J. Carlesimo at a team practice. When Carlesimo criticized Sprewell’s passing, Sprewell allegedly grabbed Carlesimo by the throat and held him for 20 seconds (“The ‘choke,’” 2004). Sprewell was suspended for 68 games by NBA Commissioner David Stern and eventually traded to the New York Knicks. “There was just a buildup of anger and frustration and having it all bottled up and not being able to express myself. At that point, it just came to a head,” said Sprewell (Puma, 2007, ¶1).
In rejecting the Timberwolves’ three-year, $21 million contract offer, Sprewell issued what has arguably become the most famous contract-related statement by a professional athlete: “I’ve got my family to feed” (“Sprewell blames,” 2004, ¶3). Criticism of Sprewell’s apparent greed and implied indifference to the struggles of working families was quick and severe. Although he later acknowledged “the stuff I’m going through is minute compared to a lot of things people go through on a daily basis” (“Sprewell blames,” 2004, ¶4), for many fans Sprewell still epitomizes the greedy, pampered professional athlete.

Player dissatisfaction with a contact or salary demands is often met with public scorn, regardless of the player’s race. Fans who spend a great deal of money to sustain connections to their favorite teams feel entitled to loyalty from players. Fueling the fan’s distaste are print and broadcast sports journalists, along with the hosts of sports talk shows on television and radio. Constantly in search of dramatic narratives—and large audiences—these journalists and their on-air colleagues often purposely amplify the criticism directed by fans at players.

And nowhere is this criticism more vociferous than during a contract holdout. A holdout occurs when a player refuses to play because he or she is unsatisfied with a current contract or new contract terms offered by a team. Many holdouts occur during pre-season and become season-long distractions, like Terrell Owens’ refusal to play for the Philadelphia Eagles before the 2005 season. The major professional sports each season see at least a few recently drafted and established players hold out until they receive what they believe are more equitable contract terms.

Sports journalists typically raise questions about the motives of a player who decides to hold out. They question the player’s loyalty to the team, as well as the player’s devotion to the game and to the team’s fans. They mock the player’s obsession with money. A previous study (Bishop, 2005) revealed sports journalists in Seattle treated Joey Galloway, then a member of the
NFL’s Seattle Seahawks, like a petulant child during his contract holdout. These issues raise an important research question: do sports journalists treat white and African-American athletes differently when they conduct holdouts? The case study described in this paper sought to answer this question.

Review of the Literature

While research on differences in coverage by sports journalists and commentators of white and African-American athletes in a variety of sports is plentiful, there has been little research into the shape and depth of holdout coverage. Much of the research on racism in sports journalists and commentators has focused on the language used by journalists and by television commentators to describe the athletic performance of African-American athletes (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Birrell, 1997; Denham, Billings, & Halone, 2002; Hardin, Dodd, Chance & Walsdorf, 2004; Jackson, 1989; Sabo, Jansen, Tate, Duncan & Leggett, 1995; Wonssek, 1992).

More pertinent for the present study are findings that African-American athletes are typically portrayed as self-centered, arrogant, and overly concerned with making money. They are more likely than white athletes to complain when they feel underpaid, as Cole and Andrews (1996) suggested in their study of the NBA’s efforts to remake the league’s image in the 1980s. African-American players were infantilized, the authors note, through depictions of them by journalists as selfish, lazy, unappealing, and as lacking the will to win, even when they were successful.

African-American athletes are still portrayed as deviant, violent, compulsive and reckless, and “viewed as potentially polluting and destructive, incapable of attaining social and moral sophistication” (Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Waldorf, 2004, p. 214). Much of the coverage of African-American athletes is still informed by the “black men misbehaving” narrative explored by Clarke (1991) “that simultaneously expresses, affirms, and
authorizes popular fears, pleasures, and anxieties in ways that shape the experience of race in both personal and public spaces” (as cited in Cole & Andrews, 1996, p. 143). The same journalists who contributed to the infantilization of African-American athletes conveyed the impression that the NBA of the late 1970s and early 1980s had been irreparably damaged by an alleged epidemic of drug use primarily by African-American athletes with time and large sums of money on their hands. According to Hughes (2004), incoming commissioner NBA David Stern endeavored to make African-American athletes more palatable to white fans so as to protect the league’s image and safeguard its profits. “Blackness has come to embody a pollutant within the NBA that necessitates surveillance and regulation,” observed Leonard (2006, p. 160). And, as Denzin (2001, p. 7) suggested, this supposed pollutant has affected society writ large: “the black other occupies a complex site, a place where fears, desires, and repressed dreams are lodged.”

League owners acted again after the so-called “Palace Brawl” in 2004 involving players from the Indiana Pacers and Detroit Pistons by approving a policy that bans high school players from entering the NBA. Negative public reaction to footage of the brawl, claims Leonard, reflects a broader, deeply held view “that blames Black culture . . . for the pollution, corruption, and denigration of American life” (2006, p. 159). To justify the new policy, Stern and league owners, with the help of journalists, turned the brawl into a national crisis—not a new practice, according to Gray (as cited in Leonard, 2006, p. 159): “So often media narratives presume and then fix in representation the purported natural affinity between black criminality and threats to the nation.”

The desire to make the African-American athlete palatable for a mainstream audience has deep historical roots, argues New York Times sportswriter William Rhoden (2006). Pioneering African-American athletes like Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays brought a new style to their new teams, one through which they
exuded “flair” and “cool.” Playing the game well was only one part of their performance. “You had to play with style and soul,” Rhoden argues (2006, p. 149). African-American players were “free to make powerful statements using gestural modes of expression to celebrate, honor, and even exude” (p. 151). Players like Robinson and Mays, as well as the growing number of African-American players in the other major professional sports, successfully introduced what Rhoden calls the “Black Thing” to mainstream American culture. As these sports became more popular during the 1950s and 1960s, white and African-American fans began to appreciate and emulate the “level of artistry” they saw in these players.

Team owners and league officials, all of whom were white, were quick to capitalize on the “mix of ingenuity and race, sensuality and strength, beauty and violence, rage and vulnerability” (p. 153) injected into sports by African-American players. Yet as the nation’s regard for these athletes increased and the number of African-American athletes in professional sports continued to climb, the African-American community, Rhoden notes, was not permitted to “profit from this soul” (p. 153).

Further, team and league executives grew wary of the new style; some journalists referred to Mays and other African-American athletes as “showboats.” Leonard (2006) suggests that today their wariness takes the form of keeping African-American athletes under surveillance through policies like the NBA high school player ban while at the same time making a great deal of money from their on-court performance. Eager to maximize profits, team and league officials follow a “White supremacist logic that focuses, organizes, and translates blackness into commodifiable representations and desires that [can] be packaged and marketed across the landscape of American popular culture” (Leonard, 2006, p. 176). What they cannot do is engage in “irresponsible, indolent and promiscuous displays” (Andrews, 1996, p. 115) that might tarnish the league’s image.

Rhoden (2006) rightly claims that executives could never be
convinced that white middle-class fans would embrace Mays. The “Black Thing” never completely won over white fans, so while African-American athletes were applauded, they never developed the level of intimacy with fans enjoyed by the likes of Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio. What is left is what Rhoden elegantly described as the “Conveyor Belt”: the vitality—indeed the survival—of professional sports depends on a steady influx of young African-American players. Team owners set about developing “a full-service delivery system to identify, prepare, and carry black muscle to market,” (Rhoden, 2006, p. 169). Talented players are identified early in their lives and essentially isolated as they move along the Belt. Their talents are developed and showcased in high-powered leagues and camps which attract top coaches. Along the way, Rhoden contends, they develop an inflated sense of entitlement.

More pertinent for this research is Rhoden’s contention that these athletes, wrested from their homes and communities, watch as their racial identities are erased. There is no room in professional sports for African-American athletes who think of themselves, or their situations, in racial terms. To successfully navigate their pro careers, athletes must not rock the boat; they must instead focus on “making those in positions of power feel comfortable with their blackness” (Rhoden, 2006, p. 178). These athletes are trained to never question the system that provides their high salaries and lavish lifestyles. The Belt limits their thinking and ambition and inculcates a dim view of confrontation with team and league officials, else their salary and the objects it buys be taken away. Instead, these players are taught to be deferential to officials—and on the college level, to boosters and alumni. In short, the Belt emasculates African-American athletes.

Noted sociologist Harry Edwards echoes Rhoden and laments the lack of activist spirit in today’s African-American athletes. Success, he argues, has stifled their desire to challenge the system: “Athletes no longer really talk about black athletic soli-
darity because there is not a lot of difference between the circumstances of black athletes and white athletes in the sports we have major access to, except that there may be more of us, and maybe we make more money” (as quoted in Leonard, 1998).

Instead of calling attention through protest to the continuing inequity caused by time spent on the Belt, or even speaking critically to the media, too many African-American athletes are busy “doing anything to draw attention to themselves as individuals” (Leonard, 1998). Perhaps because they live and work “in a rich, largely white world, a world where black individuality is tolerated so long as it is without reference to the black community,” Edwards argues, the history of the African-American struggle for equality, and the bold actions of activist athletes like Curt Flood and Tommie Smith and John Carlos simply are not relevant. “They have no idea about who set the table at which they are feasting,” Edwards notes (Leonard, 1998).

Method

A textual analysis was conducted of news articles written in the late summer of 2004 about the contract holdouts of quarterback Philip Rivers of the San Diego Chargers, who is white, and Kellen Winslow II, an African-American tight end who plays for the Cleveland Browns. Both players were selected in the first round of the 2004 NFL draft. Articles obtained in the analysis were written by sports journalists assigned by news organizations in and near Cleveland to cover the teams during training camp in 2004, as well as by sports columnists for those news organizations. The articles appeared on the websites run by these publications, and were obtained from the websites and several other article databases. The San Diego Union-Tribune is the only major daily newspaper in San Diego. The work of reporters Ed Graney and Jim Trotter, and columnists Nick Canepa and Tim Sullivan was obtained for analysis, as were stories written by Cleveland Plain Dealer beat writers Tony Grossi and Mary Kay Cabot, and
columnist Bob Dolgan, *Lorain Morning Journal* reporter Jeff Schudel, and *Akron Beacon Journal* reporters Marla Ridenour and Brian Windhorst. Only those articles in which a reporter or columnist discussed the holdouts at length were analyzed.

Stuart Hall (1975, p. 15) contends that a properly conducted textual analysis begins with “a long preliminary soak” in the texts under analysis. This is followed by numerous additional readings by the researcher to identify, develop, and refine themes that emerge from those texts. Leo Masterman (1975, p. 127) believes that “breaking through” a text in this manner permits the researcher to thoroughly explore “the rhetorical techniques through which meanings are produced.”

Textual analysis, claims Roy (1996, p. 318), should “work back through the narrative elements of form, rhetoric, and style to uncover the underlying social and historical processes” affecting the text, and also the “meta-language that guided its production.” Of particular importance to this research are the verbal, rhetorical, and presentational codes that beat writers for San Diego and Cleveland news organizations employ to make a story eventful.

**The Players**

Philip Rivers starred at quarterback for North Carolina State University from 2000–2003 and holds the NCAA record for career starts (51), and is college football’s second all-time leading passer. He led the school to wins in three bowl games and completed more than 70 percent of his passes in his senior year. In the 2004 NFL Draft, Rivers was originally selected by the New York Giants with the fourth overall pick, but was quickly traded to the San Diego Chargers for Eli Manning, the draft’s top overall pick, along with two additional draft selections. After playing sparingly in his first two NFL seasons, Rivers led the Chargers to the playoffs in 2006, throwing for 22 touchdowns (“National Football League,” 2007).
Kellen Winslow II is the son of NFL Hall of Fame tight end Kellen Winslow, who starred with the San Diego Chargers from 1979 to 1987 (“Pro Football,” 2007). Kellen II plays the same position as his father, and was a top player on the University of Miami’s football team. The Cleveland Browns selected Winslow with the sixth overall pick in the 2004 draft. Winslow missed most of his rookie season after fracturing his leg, then all of 2005 with a damaged knee and internal injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident.

**Discussion**

**The Neophytes**

Coverage of the initial phase of contract negotiations between the Browns and Winslow suggested that both sides behaved civilly. Browns officials and beat writers had not yet placed Winslow under the kind of surveillance suggested by Leonard (2006). Tony Grossi (2004a) of the Cleveland Plain Dealer reported on July 28 that the team would soon meet with Winslow’s agent, Keith Poston, to discuss contract terms. The story’s headline, “Browns Close to Seeing a Sign,” suggests a team’s typical hope that it will quickly sign its draft picks without acrimony. Poston was due at Browns camp that day to meet with team president John Collins and Randy Lerner, the team’s owner. The trio had previously met on Poston’s “turf”—somewhere in “the Detroit area” (2004a). The “turf” occupied by Rivers’ agent, Jimmy Sexton, was never discussed. Use of the word in this way suggests gang imagery, or at least that Poston would be aggressive in representing his client.

Grossi reported that the meeting between Poston, Collins, and Lerner would take place the day after the Washington Redskins signed Sean Taylor, a safety and teammate of Winslow’s at the University of Miami, to a seven-year, $18 million contract which included $13 million in bonuses. Grossi suggested
that the timing of the meeting was not tied to Taylor’s signing and should not be taken as “an indicator of progress” in talks with Winslow, which already revolved around the latter’s possible salary demands. Poston would probably base his demands for Winslow on the contract eventually signed by Eli Manning, which included a $20 million signing bonus. “In other words,” wrote Grossi, “it’s possible Winslow could be signed before Manning” (2004a).

Grossi and the other Browns beat writers noted that Collins and Lerner were relative neophytes at contract negotiation, having just taken control of the team. While they delicately covered the inexperienced negotiators, Chargers executives were the targets of nearly constant criticism by local sportswriters, thanks to the team’s failure to make the playoffs the previous eight seasons. Particularly harsh on Charger management was San Diego Union-Tribune columnist Alex Canepa. At first, Canepa was restrained in his criticism of Alex Smith, who in 2004 began his second season as the Chargers’ general manager. “The jury remains sequestered” on Smith, he wrote, “but it must be remembered he didn’t create this mess.” Smith’s predecessors, Bobby Beathard and John Butler, had set the team on its losing course, Canepa (2004a) suggested.

A strong performance at quarterback was essential if the team was to improve in 2004. Drew Brees had been penciled in as the Chargers’ starter, despite a poor 2003 season. “Even if Rivers starts, he’s still a rookie, and it doesn’t take much research to look up the success of NFL freshman QBs,” Canepa wrote. Canepa signals a key theme in coverage of these holdouts: It would not be Rivers’ fault if he was unprepared once he came to camp. Quarterback is the most difficult position in football, writers would suggest—one, it should be noted, still played primarily by white athletes. “This isn’t his freshman year at North Carolina State,” Canepa noted (2004a).

While Chargers beat writers suggested that Rivers had a lot to learn, writers covering the Browns allowed team officials to
speculate on Winslow’s emotional state. Grossi (2004b) quoted then Browns coach Butch Davis as saying that Winslow would be most disappointed by his failure to report to camp. “I don’t want to go on the presumption that he might not be there or might be there, but he’d clearly be disappointed if he weren’t there on time,” Davis said. Grossi’s suggestion that Winslow might be moody is the first intimation of the petulance supposedly exhibited by African-American athletes.

And while the Chargers’ Smith was confident that Rivers would make it to camp, Grossi wrote of the Browns’ expectation that negotiations with their top pick might go from the difficult to the theatrical. “It’s going to get done,” a seemingly exasperated Davis told Grossi. “I can’t put a timetable on it. We’ve had discussions all summer. But until other players (drafted at the same time as Winslow) sign, it’s all posturing” (2004b). Grossi noted that Keith Poston left the Browns’ camp in Berea, Ohio without coming to an agreement for Winslow, causing the team to “intensify” its efforts to “have their No. 1 draft choice in uniform” for the team’s first official practice. Poston’s negotiations with Collins were described as “good but not contentious” (2004b).

On July 30, Grossi’s story (2004c) on the holdout appeared under the headline, “Winslow is Lone Outsider,” suggesting that the rhetorical banishment of Winslow had begun. He was, suggested Grossi, drawing attention to himself at the expense of the team. The secondary headline confirms this assessment: “Four others sign as team starts camp.” Grossi again described Winslow’s purported desire to be paid in a range similar to other top picks, suggesting that it was all about money. Grossi said that the new Browns management team was devoting a great deal of energy to signing Winslow. Other team executives and agents were keeping close tabs on the negotiations, suggesting that Winslow’s intransigence would have an impact beyond the Browns.

Meanwhile the Union-Tribune’s Canepa (2004b) continued to
criticize Charger management. “The Chargers never change. Give them credit for their consistency. If only they made their laughingstock public, we could buy shares and all retire.” Thus it was the team’s ineptitude, not Rivers’ mindset or behavior, which caused the delay in reaching a contract agreement. Canepa suggested Eli Manning was correct to demand the draft-day trade that sent him to New York. “Were the Mannings right, perish the thought, actually right in their boycott of San Diego?” he asked. A litany of Charger first-round holdouts, including LaDainian Tomlinson, the NFL’s top running back, led Canepa to conclude that the bungling was more than coincidence, “as if they take sadistic pleasure in forcing their No. 1 draft picks to sit (although the bosses will tell you otherwise).”

Rather than criticize Rivers or his agent, Canepa concluded Rivers would eventually “get his money.” All Rivers and Sexton had to do was wait for the Chargers to get their act together. “Maybe there are certain reasons some clubs stink all the time and others don’t,” Canepa (2004b) wrote. But even though Canepa’s tone suggested that Sexton and Rivers were not making an excessive demand for “serious coin,” Rivers should still get what he wanted “because that what the market is saying. The Chargers can’t change that. They aren’t going to. And they know it,” (Canepa, 2004b). Thus, while Winslow’s continued intransigence could, in the words of an anonymous source quoted by Grossi (2004c), set “a real bad precedent” for negotiations with other picks, Rivers could sit back and wait to get his money. Winslow had started to make team officials less than “comfortable,” to use Rhoden’s word.

**Missing in Action**

Browns beat writers discussed in detail how Winslow came to leave the team, then treated him as though he were enduring a self-imposed exile, a theme supported by the headline to the *Plain Dealer’s* July 31 article: “Winslow says no, then runs...
fly pattern.” In the story’s lead, writer Mary Kay Cabot (2004a) informed readers that while the team was practicing, “top pick Kellen Winslow was at Hopkins International Airport, boarding a plane for Houston.” Cabot quoted Winslow’s father, now part of a growing entourage of advisors (a theme discussed in detail later in the paper) as saying they “felt it was best to get him out of Cleveland at this time.” The elder Winslow said, “We didn’t want him to hear all the negative stuff.” These quotes suggest Winslow is in need of protection and that he is being pampered by his father and advisors. Writers treated his departure as a temper tantrum, evidence of Winslow’s “infantilization” (Rhoden, 2006) by his short time on the Belt. It was clearly an “irresponsible” act, to use Andrews’ word (1996, p. 115), taken to draw attention to himself.

Reached by phone at the airport by Cabot (2004a), Winslow was more concerned with his contract than with his role on the team. “I’d love to be in camp right now,” he told Cabot. “But I’m willing to wait for my fair market value.” Winslow stayed in Houston, where he worked out with some of Poston’s other clients, including fellow holdout Charles Woodson of the Raiders. At the end of the story, Cabot used a quote by Winslow’s father to suggest that all of Poston’s clients have only money on their minds: “Kellen will be with other players there who understand the importance of getting the best deal you can.” Still, “he’s ready to go,” the elder Winslow said. Here, Winslow is clearly resisting his commodification by the Browns, an act explained by journalists suggesting that Winslow felt entitled to a large contract.

The criticism of Rivers by San Diego’s writers was less personal and anchored in a broader concern for the team. Canepa interviewed Tomlinson, the team’s star player, who emphasized that a quarterback has to learn more during camp than players who play other positions. “You can’t anticipate the speed of the game. You can’t practice that stuff at home,” he told Canepa (2004b). Tomlinson, who held out a few years earlier, indirectly
instructed Rivers not to doubt himself: “I just hope Philip keeps his thoughts clear and doesn’t say: ‘do they want me?’” (2004b). The quotes from Tomlinson, while expressing concern for the team, also show support for Rivers on a personal level. As will be discussed in more detail later, support for Winslow from his Browns teammates typically took the form of acknowledgements that football was a business, and that Winslow was correctly trying to maximize his salary.

After missing so much time, Rivers probably would not earn the starting quarterback’s job, Canepa suggested. But this was not a reflection on Rivers, or a criticism of his contract demands; only five first-year quarterbacks have had winning records in their first NFL seasons. They “have enough problems, and rookie quarterbacks who lose camp time only multiply them,” Canepa wrote (2004b). While the tone of Canepa’s comments was derisive, he did not mention Rivers by name, suggesting again that Rivers was not trying to confront Chargers officials. Chargers general manager Smith acknowledged the team’s previous negotiating failures, but stressed his disappointment that negotiations with Rivers were not progressing. “It’s a no-brainer to say if he isn’t here on time, he’s behind the eight-ball,” Smith told Canepa. “How damaging it is, I don’t know. But there is no war” (2004b). Browns beat writers were quite clear about the “war” that might ensue between players and owners if negotiations with Winslow dragged on. The Browns also endured holdouts by first-round picks in 2001, 2002, and 2003, but the failure of team officials to negotiate deals was only mentioned, not criticized.

Where Smith felt no need to remind fans of how much time Rivers had missed, reporters covering the Browns conveyed the impression that team officials were taking bold steps to rein in their petulant child. Writing on July 31, Jeff Schudel (2004a) of the Lorain Morning Journal noted that Winslow was “absent” from camp, prompting Browns officials to “let fans know they are not trying to be stingy” with their first-round pick. After
describing how the Browns offered a deal comparable to the one accepted by Sean Taylor, Schudel cited portions of a statement by team president Collins conveying the team’s desire not to “penalize Kellen for being picked one slot below his former teammate.”

Like the Chargers’ Tomlinson, Jeff Garcia, then the Browns’ starting quarterback, offered only helpful advice when asked about Winslow by Schudel. “I know he wants to be here. It’s not a situation where he’s trying to avoid something. He just wants to get it worked out,” Garcia said. Garcia said he was certain that Winslow was already picking up “the mental side” of the game, and that his athletic prowess was never in doubt. All that was needed was “some reps before the regular season starts. It would be great to get some of the preseason games in with Kellen” (Schudel, 2004a).

For their part, the Chargers were sticking with “the cover story that the starting job will be earned on merit, not money.” The team would not have used a first-round pick on Rivers “had they been pleased with Brees’ progress,” Union-Tribune columnist Tim Sullivan (2004) wrote, “but it would be madness to project a rookie’s learning curve before his first performance.” It is the sophistication of play in the NFL that stands in Rivers’ way, not Rivers’ own actions. Rivers has the physical tools, but “when the whistle blows, and the professional game starts moving toward warp speed,” Sullivan wrote, “many young quarterbacks simply can’t synthesize everything they see.” But even when absent, Rivers was contributing to the team’s progress. Winslow, on the other hand, was putting trust in his entourage, as though he couldn’t make important decisions by himself. Browns coach Butch Davis deflected questions about Winslow after the first day of camp. He preferred to let Collins negotiate while he focused on “working on the guys that are here practicing.” Davis suggested on two occasions that Winslow was probably “the most disappointed guy . . . for not being here with his teammates” (Schudel, 2004a).
Think About the Team

On August 4, journalists reported that Jeff Garcia had changed his view of Winslow’s holdout, and was preparing to talk to him in hopes of convincing him to report. The *Plain Dealer* stated that Garcia had “called out” Winslow, as if he had challenged the latter to a fight. In the same article, Garcia “vowed he’ll call him to put on the heat,” as if Winslow was a criminal on the run from police (“Garcia urges,” 2004). “I think it’s important for him to get in here,” Garcia said, expressing his “strong feelings” about Winslow. “This is a team game. You’re going to get your riches no matter what. It’s going to come to you,” burnishing the portrayal of Winslow as driven only by money. Garcia also suggested that the team did not miss Winslow. Three other tight ends had taken Winslow’s place, “so we don’t really know any better. When Kellen shows up, that might be a great asset to have, but until that happens, we’re just going along as if things haven’t changed” (“Garcia urges,” 2004).

In support of Garcia, both the *Beacon Journal* and *Plain Dealer* used quotes from Browns wide receiver Andra Davis, who applauded Garcia’s leadership, and defensive back Earl Little, who was rooting for Winslow to “cash in” on the contracts offered to other first round picks. “He’s got to take his time,” Little said. “It’s football, but it’s also a business. The more he can get the better for him” (Schudel, 2004a; Ridenour, 2004a). Journalists never used Rivers’ teammates to suggest that he get as much money as possible from the Chargers. The *Plain Dealer* also suggested that Winslow might be getting bad advice from the Postons, reporting he “remains in Houston working out with Oakland cornerback Charles Woodson, another client of the Poston brothers who is unsigned” (Grossi, 2004c). Winslow’s father continued to focus on his son’s market value, especially since Sean Taylor had fired his agents for negotiating what he now believed was a sub-par contract. Winslow was working hard to “keep his son positive” through what the reporter now called an “ordeal.” Further
suggesting that his son was spoiled and immature, Winslow said he and the other advisers were “trying to prevent him from getting an attitude. We’re trying to tell him not take all of this personally, but it has been hard” (“Garcia urges,” 2004).

Talks between the Chargers and Rivers broke off on August 4. Smith called the breakdown in negotiations “disappointing and unfortunate,” saying the team made every effort to sign Rivers before he was scheduled to report. “We tried, and we couldn’t come to an agreement. He had an offer until 5 p.m. Sunday. That was rejected, and now the offer is off the table. It will only go down from here,” Smith said, referring to the amount of money offered to Rivers (“Barber and Toomer,” 2004). While reporters gave the Browns, Winslow, and Poston a stage on which to spar publicly, Union-Tribune writers treated the Rivers holdout as a private affair. The Chargers and Rivers were equally powerful participants, while Winslow was marginalized for his lack of knowledge and increasingly poor attitude. And while Cleveland reporters suggested that Winslow retreated from camp to Houston for his workouts, Rivers went home to “his old stomping grounds” in North Carolina and Alabama, but only after continuing his training near the team camp in Carson, California. While Winslow was training with disenchanted Poston clients, Rivers was “heading east to be with family and train in a more familiar environment” (Trotter, 2004a). He had the supportive community that Winslow clearly lacked.

A day later, the Chargers more forcefully announced the end of negotiations with Rivers. Team officials, reported the Union-Tribune, “rescinded the contract proposal and announced that they intend to reduce the offer at their discretion until an agreement is reached” (“Barber and Toomer,” 2004). The lack of anxiety in the Union-Tribune story is palpable. The team “offered a great deal” to Rivers, which he then rejected. Smith, reading from a “handwritten statement,” said the team would go on, without casting doubt on Rivers’ character or integrity, or suggesting, as Browns
writers had about Winslow, that Rivers was acting childish. In fact, it was Smith who was acting in “shocking” and “swift” fashion, wrote the Union-Tribune’s Trotter (2004b).

Rivers’ agent, Jimmy Sexton, whose tactics and track record were not criticized, and his other clients not invoked by Chargers’ beat writers, expressed dismay that the Chargers were negotiating publicly. Citing earlier progress, Sexton said the team’s “hard-line stance” would not bring about a deal. “All they have done over the weekend is keep making ultimatums, and it’s tough to get anything done in this environment,” he told the Union-Tribune (Trotter, 2004b). Despite Sexton’s anger, coverage suggests that both sides were acting professionally. Terms were stated clearly, without vitriol (Trotter, 2004b). Meanwhile, talks between the Browns and Winslow were at an “impasse,” according to a Plain Dealer headline and negotiations were “not going well” (Grossi, 2004c).

Canepa (2004c) attacked the team’s decision to air this “dirty laundry.” While the Rivers’ holdout had “graduated from slow pitch to softball, from picking nits to picking poison,” it was the team, not Rivers, who should be criticized for publicly airing their concerns. Sexton was “an honest agent,” one “who prefers dirty linen not hung outside on the fire escape.” If the parties stayed on their sides of the line drawn in the sand, Canepa suggested, the Chargers risked “alienating their No.1 draft choice and quarterback of the future over what doesn’t seem like enough money to chance it.” Unlike Winslow, who was cast by Browns writers as the main obstacle to a contract, Rivers was not singled out.

Even Eli Manning, who refused to play in San Diego, was allowed by journalists to weigh in on the ineptitude of team officials. The August 12 story’s headline, “Manning Can Feel for Rivers” casts Rivers as a sympathetic figure. Manning expressed hope Rivers would sign soon, and called Rivers “a talented and great guy” (Graney, 2004). Winslow, on the other hand, remained intransigent, despite a Browns offer that was “135 percent higher
than that of the No. 6 pick in the 2003 draft” and would make Winslow “the highest-paid tight end in NFL history” (Grossi, 2004c). Members of Winslow’s “camp,” wrote the Plain Dealer’s Grossi, remained firm in their belief that Winslow was already one of the NFL’s “super elite” players, and as such, should be paid a salary comparable to a top-three pick (Grossi, 2004c).

The Intervention

As talks with Winslow foundered, the Browns called on Jim Brown, perhaps the team’s most renowned player and a Hall of Famer, to persuade Winslow to report to camp. Coverage by the Plain Dealer suggested that Brown would be performing the equivalent of an intervention. “A lot of times, a positive third party can be healthy in these types of things,” Brown told reporter Mary Kay Cabot (2004b). Brown first approached Winslow’s father, who “had some great things to say,” reported Cabot. The goal for all parties, he said, was “to get the best deal possible.” The younger Winslow was not quoted in the article, amplifying the suggestion that he was not capable of handling negotiations without the intervention of multiple third parties.

Brown lavished praise on owner Randy Lerner for creating a positive environment, and for reestablishing connections with former players. “I’ve never felt better about being a Cleveland Brown and it’s all because of Randy,” Brown said (Cabot, 2004b). Brown’s sentiment supports Rhoden’s (2006) assertion that African-American athletes do not come together in “supportive communities” once they turn pro. Instead, after years of looking out for themselves, they allow themselves to be co-opted, like Brown, to serve those in power. Ironically, Brown was an essential part of the NFL’s rising popularity in the late 1950s and through the 1960s. League officials capitalized on the “black thing” Brown brought to fans of the league, and were now doing it again—in effect, to prevent Winslow from capitalizing prematurely on what he could bring to the sport.
Both the team and Garcia soon softened their earlier stances. Team president John Collins said the team might increase it last offer to Winslow, saying the previous offer was designed to convince Winslow to report. “I never thought of it as a line in the sand,” he told Cabot (2004c). Garcia and Winslow exchanged missed phone messages, and the quarterback speculated that Poston, not Winslow, was controlling negotiations, reinforcing the impression that Winslow was not his own person. “Certain things are out of his hands as far as the contract goes. That’s between his agent and the Browns,” Garcia said (Ridenour, 2004b).

Before the first 2004 exhibition game Trotter (2004c) jokingly wrote that a stellar performance by Brees might cause team officials to call off negotiations with Rivers. His use of humor suggested again the team’s desperate need for Rivers, who would inevitably take the starter’s job from Brees. The same day, the Chargers announced they had signed Tomlinson to a lucrative six-year contract extension. Canepa (2004c) was at a loss to reconcile the Chargers’ frugality and pigheadedness with their sudden willingness to “open its vault.” It was now up to the team to “take care of another of its own,” and to “turn ridiculous in to sublime and actually get a No. 1 draft choice signed before he turns 30 years of age.”

Team officials said the Tomlinson deal was not designed to “cover the embarrassment” of the Rivers holdout, but Canepa was not convinced. “The ball is being dropped here,” he wrote. “Rivers should be in camp. He should have been playing [in the first exhibition game],” if only for the benefit of the fans. Rivers “was the offseason splash, he’s the interest and now he isn’t around and we hear the two sides haven’t talked in days. So whose fault is it?” Canepa (2004c) answered by putting the blame on the team, not Rivers. Despite his absence and lack of preparation for football’s toughest position, Rivers was unmistakably portrayed as having more power and leverage than Winslow.
A Short Flight Away

Poston, Winslow’s father, and the team traded criticisms on August 10. Some progress in negotiations was reported, but Poston flew back to Detroit without an agreement. Winslow, who had not been quoted in some time by journalists, told a reporter he “was just a short flight away” if team officials wanted to continue negotiations (Ridenour, 2004c). Poston acknowledged the progress. “We hope to get it done, but . . . I’ve always said it takes two to dance,” he said (Ridenour, 2004c). For his part, Jim Brown was still trying to convince Winslow more than money was at stake. “You try to bring reason and you talk about quality of life, not just about money,” he told a radio reporter (as quoted in Schudel, 2004b). Brown suggested that Winslow was getting bad advice from Poston. “An agent is out there to get every bit of money. But sometimes when you get every bit of money, you don’t deal with the player’s best interests” (Schudel, 2004b). Here, journalists permitted Brown to redefine contentment or fulfillment for Winslow; his “best interests” meant stopping the holdout and joining the team.

Rivers ended his holdout on August 23, signing a 6-year, $40.5 million contract that included $14.5 million in bonuses (“Rivers gets,” 2004). He made a fairly seamless transition onto the field after his holdout ended, according to San Diego sportswriters. The Union-Tribune’s Jim Trotter (2004d) led his first post-holdout story with a positive assessment from a teammate of Rivers’ play. “I didn’t even notice a difference between him and the other quarterbacks, unless I just looked back there and saw his number and his face,” said safety Terrence Kiel. Other players interviewed by Trotter echoed Kiel and suggested the disruption to the team caused by Rivers’ holdout was minimal. Supporting the “exile” theme discussed earlier, Trotter explained that teammates “covered Rivers back” while he was out. “Don’t feel like you’re going to come in here and everybody is going to look down on you,” said teammate Kevin Dyson. “Do what you’ve
got to do and handle your business because you’re the only one that’s going to take care of you.” All of Rivers’ teammates were “in his corner,” and were poised “to support him either way” (Trotter, 2004d). Rivers enjoyed the kind of community support that African-American athletes typically lack, as Rhoden, Edwards, and others argue.

Winslow actually signed before Rivers and held out for fewer days (11 compared to 23). His 6-year contract worth $29 million included $16.5 million in bonuses and made him the highest paid tight end in the NFL (“Rookie is,” 2004). Cabot noted that Winslow “humbly” assessed his level of preparation after his first practice. “I’m very far behind,” he told Cabot and other reporters. “My head is spinning. I have a lot to learn. I’m a rookie. I’m 21 and I have a whole lot to do” (2004d). Rivers was ready; Winslow would need time, reporters suggested. “To get the system down,” he told Cabot (2004d), “to master it, takes about a year or a half a year. It’s not going to happen in two weeks.” His first practice, like Rivers’, included some flashes of his talent. “Any rust that might be on his sculpted 6-foot-4, 250-pound body didn’t show,” wrote Jeff Schudel (2004c). His physical prowess was obvious; it would take time for his intellect to catch up. Winslow was again quoted as saying that he was after “fair market value” from the Browns. As one Plain Dealer reporter put it, Winslow “has hit it rich beyond the dreams of ordinary mortals” (Dolgan, 2004). And he wanted even more: he could now worry about trying to buy the number 80—his number in college, and his father’s NFL number—from a teammate. One journalist suggested he ask Poston to represent him in the negotiations (Schudel, 2004c).

Reporters noted no nervousness or fear of not being prepared in Rivers. He was “everything the Chargers envisioned” in his first game. While his performance against the Seattle Seahawks in his first exhibition game was “good and bad, hot and cold, on target and off the mark”(Trotter, 2004e), Rivers was in control of the situation. Canepa’s column (2004e) on Rivers’ re-
turn was sardonic: “It was like a vision. A miracle. Was it really the Philip Rivers?” He complimented the rookie’s skills, and again blamed both sides for the impasse. Chargers coach Marty Schottenheimer told Trotter (2004c), “There are no messiahs in this business,” but Rivers was far more confident in his self-assessments than Winslow.

**Conclusions**

This study suggests that journalists writing for Cleveland news organizations emasculated Winslow, treating him like a moody adolescent incapable of making significant decisions on his own. Any athlete takes a risk by confronting management, but this research suggests that risk is heightened for African-American athletes. Winslow wanted to jump on the “Conveyor Belt” described by Rhoden (2006), but on his terms. As his father told Rhoden, young players must make themselves aware that they are indeed on the Belt. “You have something they want; you better take advantage of that” (p. 184). For his trouble, journalists covering the Browns suggested Winslow was immature and was driven by greed, confirming the assertion made by Cole and Andrews (1996). He had shown signs of “misbehaving” in the sense suggested by Clarke (1991). Winslow should have been grateful for the Browns’ substantial offer, money that, as Rhoden notes, would be at least partially generated by his own performance on the field (p. 189). He wanted to “profit from this soul” (p. 153).

And while San Diego sports journalists suggested that Philip Rivers was driven away from Chargers training camp by the team’s history of inept negotiating, Winslow seemed to flee Browns camp on the advice of a cadre of advisors led by his father. Instead of highlighting the many lessons shared by Winslow with his son about life on the Belt, told in detail to Rhoden, sports journalists suggested that the holdout required intervention by Jim Brown and other former players in order to bring Winslow to his senses. By characterizing his departure in
this fashion, writers suggested that Winslow had created a self-imposed exile—one that Browns officials clearly controlled. His abrupt departure kept him at a safe distance from the team, so that his dissatisfaction would not affect their preparations. But he was still under surveillance, as Leonard (1998, 2006) might suggest.

San Diego sports journalists chose not to remind readers of Rivers’ whereabouts. The team needed him, and although he would have to learn a difficult position, he was up to the task, one he would undertake when he returned. Rivers was, suggested journalists, a quick study, where Winslow, when he returned to camp, was overwhelmed. Rivers, on the other hand, “was the off-season splash,” wrote Canepa (2004c), a title never given to Winslow, even when he returned. Failure to celebrate Winslow’s abilities, and the tendency to laud Rivers, may be attributable to the prominence of the quarterback’s position. And while Winslow was resisting his commodification by the Browns, San Diego writers suggested that Rivers would eagerly participate in his, once he and the team worked what was portrayed as an inevitable agreement. Unlike Winslow, money was not Rivers’ top priority. Chargers beat writers asserted that he would inevitably get the money he was seeking, in part because he had not tried to exert influence on the market through the kind of “irresponsible” and “indolent” (Andrews, 1996, p. 115) acts taken by Winslow.

Winslow endured the holdout without the emotional support of his teammates. Once he left camp, he was isolated by journalists, and his entourage, bent on challenging a system that likely would continue to prevent him from building a community with other players, was his only source of support. Instead of keeping Winslow abreast of what they were learning in camp, as Rivers’ teammates did for him, support for Winslow took the form of exhortations to achieve the best deal he could. Football was a business, suggested his teammates, most of whom were African-Americans. They could not be counted on for empathy,
but could applaud Winslow for getting as much money as possible from the Browns.

Rivers was never directly compared to other players drafted in 2004. Journalists, Winslow, and Winslow’s father and agent repeatedly compared Winslow with Sean Taylor, eventually suggesting, in characterizing Winslow’s drive to get back to camp as stimulated by seeing Taylor play once, that Winslow was petty and competitive. Discussions focused on how Rivers would help the team with his intelligence and physical skill, while the benefits to the team only of Winslow’s physical gifts were highlighted by journalists as the holdout continued. Winslow would get the chance to display the flair and “cool” described by Rhoden (2006), but only on the Browns’ terms.

Winslow was portrayed, although not with great vitriol, by Browns writers as a “pollutant” and someone “incapable of attaining social and moral sophistication” (Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Waldorf, 2004, 214). Once in camp, Winslow was quoted by journalists as saying he lacked the sophistication to pick up the team’s plays—certainly not as quickly as Rivers did after his holdout ended. Rivers would eventually become a star, but the jury was still out on Winslow, even with his impressive physical ability. By putting his interests first, Winslow was a threat to the team’s future success. He was acting out, engaging in the kind of irresponsible behavior feared by league and team officials and which are often grounds from removal from the “Conveyor Belt” described by Rhoden. In contrast, Chargers management, not Rivers, was the biggest threat to the team’s success. Rivers should return to camp, Chargers writers suggested, but he deserved the money. Unlike Winslow, he was ready and willing to become a commodity. In actuality, Winslow was thinking for himself and refusing—at least for a short time—to defer automatically to team officials.

Researchers who build on these findings should explore whether this treatment of African-American athletes is seen in
the work of journalists covering other teams, and players in other sports. Locating stories about white athletes who engaged in holdouts for this paper was not without difficulty. Much of the news coverage consulted before this project began dealt with the actions of African-American athletes. Perhaps there is evidence that white athletes do not hold out as often; still, additional research is clearly needed here.

It is hoped that this research will stimulate dialogue among sports journalists about the potentially damaging nature of these themes. Whether reporters have made significant progress in ridding their writing of racial stereotypes is open to debate. It could be argued that the themes found here are among the more subtle forms of racism seen in the media, and in society. But racism is racism, and should not play a key thematic role in coverage of athletics.

Ronald Bishop is a professor in the Department of Culture and Communication at Drexel University, where he teaches newswriting, media law, sportswriting, and courses in political communication and on the cultural significance of fame. The author of an upcoming book on the importance of pick-up games, his work has been published in the Journal of Communication, Journalism and Communication Monographs, the Journal of Communication Inquiry, and the Journal of Popular Culture.

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