



SPORTS AS THE PATH TO SUCCESS?

Myth and Reality

Sports are a lottery ticket out of poverty.

—Dave Zirin

Sports are a detriment to blacks, not a positive. You have a society now where every black kid in the country thinks the only way he can be successful is through athletics.

—Charles Barkley, former NBA star
and an African American

Even the most competitive athlete must confront The End, and its attendant changes in earning power, lifestyle, physique and purpose.

—Chris Ballard, writer for *Sports Illustrated*

Compared with much of the world, the United States is a society friendly to upward social mobility. It is possible for poor children and penniless immigrants to become prosperous or even wealthy adults, based on some combination of hard work, educational attainment, skills/talents, and luck. Upward mobility within the system of social stratification is not only permitted but is also part of the American creed that everyone should aspire to a higher social position. Americans, moreover,

firmly believe that the United States is a “meritocratic” society in which social status is determined by achievement.

This belief, however, is largely a myth. Income statistics show that by far most children in this country remain in the social class of their parents. If there is movement, it tends to be slight. Traditionally, this mobility was more likely to be up than down, but the degree of social mobility has slowed in recent decades. This is because of a shrinking middle class and a greater inequality gap (that is, the distance between the wealthy and the poor).¹ Actually, according to economist Miles Corak, the United States is less mobile than other wealthy nations: “The U.S. and Britain appear to stand out as the least mobile societies among the rich countries studied. France and Germany are somewhat more mobile than the United States: Canada and the Nordic countries are much more so.”² Although blatant forms of racism and sexism are less relevant today than in the past, race and gender issues continue to hinder the upward mobility of racial minorities and women. White males have higher pay and higher status jobs than women and racial minorities even when their parents have similar status. To belabor the point, in 2013, the median household income for whites was \$58,270, for Latinos \$40,963, and for African Americans it was \$34,598. In terms of gender, earnings of full-time, year-round workers were \$60,769 for men and \$45,068 for women.³

To summarize, sociological and economic research leads to several conclusions about social mobility in the United States:⁴

- Few children of white-collar workers become blue-collar workers.
- Most mobility moves are slight.
- Occupational inheritance is highest for children of professions (physicians, lawyers, professors).
- The opportunities for the children of nonprofessionals to become professionals are very small.
- While the long-term trend in social mobility has been upward, since the 1970s this trend has reversed.
- Social mobility is the least likely at the extremes of wealth and poverty.
- While there are many individual exceptions, the overall trend by race/ethnicity is that the gap in wealth/income between

African Americans and Latinos remained about the same.

- While there are more and more opportunities for full equality for women.

SPORT AS AN AVENUE TO

Typically, Americans believe that sports provide a path to upward mobility. Poor boys (rarely girls) from inner cities or rural areas, sometimes black, sometimes skyrocket to the top of sports. The financial rewards are enormous. The weather earned approximately \$19 million in 2014. His opponent, Manny Paacqui, earned ten highest paid NBA players in 2014 with only a high school education (plus \$19 million in endorsements). In 2014, the highest paid outfielder Giancarlo Stanton.

High salaries and endorsement opportunities provided by sports, especially basketball, and some other sports, provide a path to college. Thus sports participation provides a path to attain more education and a career outside the sports world for many. Higher education also provides a wider career.

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SPORT AS AN AVENUE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Typically, Americans believe that sport is a path to upward social mobility. Poor boys (rarely girls) from rural and urban areas, whether white or black, sometimes skyrocket to fame and fortune through success in sports. The financial rewards can be astounding. Boxer Floyd Mayweather earned approximately \$180 million for a single fight in 2015. His opponent, Manny Paacquiao earned \$120 million. Nine of the top-ten highest paid NBA players in 2014 were African Americans. In 2014, basketball great LeBron James, raised by a single mother in poverty and with only a high school education made \$53 million just from endorsements (plus \$19 million in salary). In baseball, the most lucrative contract in 2014 was a thirteen-year deal for \$325 million to Miami Marlins outfielder Giancarlo Stanton.

High salaries and endorsement contracts are not the only financial opportunities provided by sport. The road to success in football, basketball, and some other sports virtually requires the athletes to attend college. Thus sports participation has the effect of encouraging athletes to attain more education and increasing the opportunities for success outside the sports world for those who do not find positions as players. Higher education also widens athletes’ opportunities after a professional career.

Participation in sports is no guarantee of upward social mobility. Clearly, some do not succeed after their sports career is over, as we will soon see. But being an athlete does have the potential to move the individual up in social class. There are at least three possible reasons for this. First, athletic participation may lead to various forms of “occupational sponsorship.” The male college athlete, especially in big-time sport, is a popular hero and therefore is more likely to date and marry a woman of higher socioeconomic status and may acquire in-laws who can provide him with benefits in the business world much greater than those

available to the average nonathlete male. Another form of sponsorship may come from well-placed alumni who offer former athletes positions in their businesses after graduation. This may be done to help the firm's public relations, or it may be part of a payoff in the recruiting wars that some alumni are willing to underwrite.

A second reason for athletes' better outcomes is that the selection process for many jobs requires the applicant to be "well-rounded," meaning that a premium is placed on participation in extracurricular activities in addition to classes taken and grade-point averages.

Finally, participation in highly competitive sports situations may lead to the development of attitudes and behavior patterns highly valued in the larger occupational world. If attributes such as leadership, human-relations skills, teamwork, good work habits, and a well-developed competitive drive are acquired in sports, they may ensure that athletes will succeed in other endeavors. Considerable debate surrounds the question, does sports participation build character? Or is it that only certain kinds of personalities survive the sports experience (see chapter 4)? There may be a self-fulfilling prophecy at work here, however. Employers who assume that athletes possess these valued character traits will make hiring and advancement decisions accordingly, giving former athletes an advantage over their nonathletic peers. Yet a closer look at the situations that actually exist shows that for the vast majority, these benefits are fleeting at best.

MYTHS ABOUT SOCIAL MOBILITY THROUGH SPORT

The belief that sport is a social mobility escalator is built on a succession of myths, including: (1) sport provides a free college education; (2) sport leads to a college degree; (3) a professional sports career is possible; (4) sport is a way out of poverty, especially for racial minorities; (5) Title IX has created many opportunities for upward mobility through sport for women; and (6) a professional sports career provides security for life.

Myth 1: Sport Provides a Free College Education

About 150,000 men and women collegiate athletes in NCAA Divisions I and II receive \$2.7 billion in scholarships annually. Within these

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numbers there are two myths: (1) that most college athletes receive the full cost of their education; and (2) that most college athletes get this "free education." Regarding the first myth, until 2015 a full-ride scholarship was a misnomer, because it did not include the incidental costs of attending college (depending on the college an annual gap of between \$952 and \$6,127).⁵ Now the schools with adequate revenue can provide a full package. The problem is that not all schools will be able to provide this expensive deal to recruits, which will increase the competitive distance between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in college sport and that many "full-ride" athletes will continue to receive less than a full ride.

A common assumption is that athletic scholarships are plentiful. The data show otherwise:⁶ First, very few high school athletes actually receive full-ride scholarships. Actually for every 100 high school athletes, only one will receive a full-time athletic scholarship. The bulk of these full scholarships go to football and basketball players, since Division I schools have eighty-five full-ride football scholarships, thirteen full-ride basketball scholarships for men and fifteen for women. Athletes in other sports receive partial scholarships, if at all. For example, Division I baseball limits schools to 11.7 full rides, which coaches, typically divide into a number of partial scholarships.⁷ In effect, the prospects of receiving a free college education for a full-ride scholarship for a male athlete in a so-called minor sport (swimming, tennis, golf, gymnastics, track, cross-country, wrestling) are virtually nil. At most, such an athlete can hope for a partial scholarship, since these sports are underfunded and stand to be eliminated at many schools. And, third, as low as the chances are for men, women athletes have even less chance to receive an athletic scholarship. Although women make up about 57 percent of all college students, they receive only 45 percent of the athletic scholarships (see chapter 8).

Myth 2: Sport Leads to a College Degree

College graduates exceed high school graduates in lifetime earnings by hundreds of thousands of dollars. Since most high school and college athletes never play at the professional level, the attainment of a college degree is a crucial determinant of upward mobility through sport. The problem is that relatively few athletes in the big-time revenue-producing

sports, compared to their nonathlete full-time student peers, actually receive college degrees. In 2012, only 39 of 917 major league baseball players had a college degree (4.3 percent). Similarly, few players in the National Hockey League players are college graduates. These low rates in baseball and hockey are the result of these sports having minor leagues for aspiring athletes, making it easier to skip college. Where college is expected, the rates are much higher. In football, for instance, players will play in college for at least three years before becoming eligible to play in the NFL. As a result, almost half of NFL players (46 percent) are college graduates.

For athletes who attend college, graduation rates vary by sport, gender, and race. Athletes in individual sports are more likely to graduate than athletes in team sports. This is likely a consequence of the social class of the athletes, since individual sports are more expensive to learn and often require access to a country club for coaching and facilities. In a team sport such as track, athletes running distance races are more likely to graduate than sprinters. Among athletes, women are more likely to graduate than men. In sports where African Americans are numerous—for example, the revenue sports of football and men's basketball—the graduation rate will be less than in the nonrevenue-producing sports.

There are a number of barriers to graduation for athletes. The demands on their time and energy are enormous, even in the off-season. To cope with these pressures and to maintain eligibility, many athletes choose or are advised to take easy courses that do not lead to graduation. This strategy either delays graduation or makes it an unrealistic goal.

Another barrier to graduation for many college athletes is that they are recruited for athletic prowess rather than academic ability in the first place. The data show that football players in big-time programs are, on average, more than two hundred points (on SAT tests) behind their nonathlete classmates. Poorly prepared students are the most likely to take easy courses, cheat on exams, hire surrogate test-takers and term-paper writers, and otherwise do the minimum required. In other words, although they are in school, they are not receiving an education that will be an asset when they leave school.

A third barrier to graduation is that some college athletes do not take advantage of their scholarships to obtain a quality education and

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graduate. This is especially the case for those who perceive their college experience only as preparation for a professional career in sport. This is an extremely misinformed belief. A survey of Division I Study men's basketball players found that 76 percent believed that they had a shot to play in the NBA, despite the reality that only 1.2 percent will be drafted; in football, the perception by 52 percent of the Division I athletes is that they will play in the NFL, yet only 1.6 percent will actually get to play.⁸ School for them is only a matter of maintaining their eligibility. The goal of a professional career is unrealistic for all but the superstars. And the superstars who do make it at the professional level probably do not graduate from college. Even a successful professional athletic career is limited to a few years (e.g., 3.5 years in the NFL, 4.8 years in the NBA), and not many professional athletes are able to translate their success in the pros to success in postathletic careers.

Myth 3: A Professional Sports Career Is Possible

The dream of financial success through a professional sports career is just that, a dream, however, for all but an infinitesimal number. The career opportunities are few. Consider the following data supplied by the NCAA, keeping in mind that being drafted by a professional team is no guarantee that one will ever play at that level.⁹

- 1.7 percent of senior football players will be drafted by an NFL team (0.08 percent of high school seniors will eventually be drafted by an NFL team—eight in ten thousand).
- 1.2 percent of male senior basketball players will be drafted by an NBA team (0.03 of high school seniors will be drafted by an NBA team—three in ten thousand).
- 8.9 percent of high school senior baseball players (nine in one hundred) will be drafted by a major league team—0.44 percent of high school seniors (one in two hundred) will someday be drafted by a major league team.

To explain this rigorous winnowing process further: about 13,600 players are eligible for the NFL draft each year. Of them, 250 are

drafted and about 160 actually make the final roster. For men's basketball, about forty-four new players are added to the rosters in the NBA. In tennis, about a hundred men and an equal number of women make enough money to cover expenses. The situation is similar in golf.

Finally, let's look at this distillation process another way:

Less than half of all American children will play high school sports. Of those, only 1 in 28 will go on to play any sport in college, at any level. Of those, 1 in 75 will get drafted by one of the major professional leagues—football, baseball, hockey, soccer, and men's and women's basketball—where the vast majority of full-time jobs are found. Of those drafted, most will not make the team or, in the case of baseball, advance to the majors. . . . Throw in the occasional golfer, tennis player, auto racer, bass fisher, and rodeo cowboy, and perhaps 300—of the four million babies born each year ultimately will pull a paycheck long enough to plausibly say they had a career in sports. (Factor in the growing number of foreigners flowing into U.S. pro sports, and the job prospects will get even worse in the coming years. . . .) So from the moment of conception, the odds of a child's eventually making a living as an athlete are roughly one in 13,333. Or one in 1.3 trillion, if you're going back to the origin and counting all the eligible sperm.¹⁰

Myth 4: Sport Is a Way Out of Poverty, Especially for Racial Minorities

A survey by the Center for the Study of Sport in Society found that two-thirds of African American males between the ages of thirteen and eighteen believe that they can earn a living by playing professional sports (more than double the proportion of young white males who hold such beliefs). Moreover, African American parents were four times more likely than white parents to believe that their children are destined for careers as professional athletes.¹¹

If these young athletes do play as professionals, the economic rewards are excellent. The NBA average salary in 2014 was about \$4.5 million, \$3.9 million in major league baseball, and \$2.0 million in the NFL. These numbers are inflated by the use of averages, which are skewed by the salaries of the superstars. Use of the median (in which half the players make more and half make less) reveals, for example, that the median

salary in baseball is \$1.2 million. Regardless of the minimum wage, professional sports careers are below the minimum wage. And, lest we forget, it is not just the major

Sport appears to be an American dominated industry. Only 12 percent of professional athletes are African American. 77 percent of professional athletes are white. In professional sports, about 1 percent of the population make the list (the list of professional athletes). These

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Although professional athletes are a small group. Of the forty-four drafted in basketball in 2014, seven will be African American. However, in the sociology of sports, have a better chance of getting

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salary in baseball (\$790,000) is more than \$3 million under the average. Regardless of the measure, however, the financial benefits of a professional sports career at the major league level are great. For instance, the minimum wage of major league players is \$414,000, which is 12.9 times greater than the average American worker's salary of \$32,000. However, some 6,000 baseball players play in the minor leagues where most salaries are below the federal poverty level of \$11,670 for a single person.¹² And, lest we forget, only about 10 percent of minor leaguers ever make it to the majors.¹³

Sport appears to be an important avenue out of poverty for African Americans. The major professional sports, except for hockey, are dominated numerically by African Americans. Although they constitute only 12 percent of the population, African Americans make up about 77 percent of the players in professional basketball, about 68 percent in professional football, and 8 percent in professional baseball (Latinos account for about 29 percent of professional baseball players, and Asians about 1 percent). Moreover, as noted earlier, African Americans dominate the list of the highest moneymakers in sport (salaries, endorsements). These facts are nevertheless illusory.

Although African Americans dominate professional basketball and football, and, to a much lesser extent, baseball, they are rarely found in other sports, such as hockey, automobile racing, tennis, golf, bowling, and skiing. Moreover, African Americans are severely underrepresented in positions of authority in sport—head coaches, referees, athletic directors, scouts, general managers, and owners. Writing about the reason for this racial imbalance in hiring, white sports columnist Bob Kravitz remarks that “something here stinks, and it stinks a lot like racism.”¹⁴

Although African American males have better odds of making it as professional athletes than whites, their odds remain exceedingly slim. Of the forty thousand or so African American boys who play high school basketball in a given year, only thirty-five will make the NBA and only seven will be starters. Referring to the low odds for young African Americans, Harry Edwards, an African American sociologist specializing in the sociology of sport, said with a bit of hyperbole: “Statistically, you have a better chance of getting hit by a meteorite in the next 10 years than getting work as an athlete.”¹⁵ These low odds are for African

American males. The chances for African American females are virtually nonexistent (except for the one fledgling women's professional basketball league).

Despite these discouraging facts, the myth is alive for poor youth: two-thirds of young African American boys believe that they can be professional athletes. Their parents also accept this belief. The film *Hoop Dreams* and Darcy Frey's book *The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams* document the emphasis that young African American men place on sport as a way up and the disappointment that they experience.¹⁶ For many of them, sport represents their only hope of escape from a life of crime, poverty, and despair. They latch on to the dream of athletic success partly because they have few opportunities for middle-class success. They spend countless hours per day developing their speed, strength, jumping height, or "moves" to the virtual exclusion of abilities that have a greater likelihood of paying off in upward mobility, such as reading comprehension, mathematical reasoning, communication skills, and computer literacy.

This futile pursuit of sports stardom has serious consequences for individual African Americans as well as for the African American community. Foremost, they spend their time learning skills that are worthless in the job market. Harry Edwards posits that by spending their energies and talents on athletic skills, young African Americans are not pursuing occupations that would help them meet their political and material needs. Thus their belief in the "sports-as-a-way-up" myth causes them to remain dependent on whites and white institutions.¹⁷ Salim Muwakkil, an African American political analyst, argues:

If African-Americans are to exploit the socio-economic options opened by varied civil rights struggles more fully, blacks must reduce the disproportionate allure of sports in their communities. Black leadership must contextualize athletic success by promoting other avenues to social status, intensifying the struggle for access to those avenues and better educating youth about those potholes on the road to the stadium.¹⁸

John Hoberman also challenges the assumption that sport has progressive consequences.¹⁹ The success of African Americans in the highly visible sports gives white America a false sense of black progress and

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interracial harmony. But the social progress of African Americans in general has little relationship to the apparent integration that they have achieved on the country's playing fields: "The illusory sense of racial harmony on countless playing fields across America masks the true depth of the racial conflict that survives in one and the same society. In this sense, the material gains of a LeBron James or a Tiger Woods impede the process of social change. For every black Superstar, there are thousands of blacks behind bars."²⁰ Hoberman also contends that the numerical superiority of African Americans in some sports, coupled with their disproportionate underrepresentation in other professions, reinforces the racist ideology that African Americans are physically superior to whites but are inferior to them intellectually. In short, sport harms African Americans by serving up imagery and metaphors that reinforce racism and the racial divisions that continue to plague US society.

I do not mean to say that talented African Americans should not seek a career in professional sport. Professional sport is a legitimate career with the potential for exceptional monetary rewards. What is harmful, to reiterate, is that the odds of success are so slim, rendering extraordinary, sustained effort futile and misguided for all but a precocious few. If this effort were directed at areas having better odds of success, then upward mobility would occur for many more. The late African American tennis star Arthur Ashe argued that "we have been on the same roads—sports and entertainment—too long. We need to pull over, fill up at the library and speed away to Congress, and the Supreme Court, the unions, and the business world."²¹

Myth 5: Title IX Has Created Many Opportunities for Upward Mobility through Sport for Women

Since Title IX was passed in 1972, requiring schools receiving federal funds to provide equal opportunities for women and men, sports participation by and scholarships for women in college have increased dramatically (see chapter 9). Upward mobility from sport is another matter for women. Women have fewer opportunities than men in professional team sports. Beach volleyball is a possibility for a very few, but again the rewards are minimal. There is one professional women's basketball

league, but the pay is very low compared to what men make. Another option for women is to play in professional leagues in Europe, Australia, and Asia.

Women have more opportunities as professionals in individual sports such as tennis, golf, ice-skating, skiing, bowling, cycling, pool, and track. Ironically, the sports with the greatest monetary rewards for women are those of the middle and upper classes (tennis, golf, and ice-skating). These sports are expensive, and they require considerable individual coaching as well as access to private facilities. In short, sport does not offer poor women, even in a very limited way, the potential for upward mobility. Speaking of African Americans in this regard, Harry Edwards has observed, "We must also consider that to the extent that sport provides an escape route from the ghetto at all, it does so only for black males."²²

Opportunities in sport apart from the athlete role are more limited for women than for men. Ironically, with the passage of Title IX, which increased the participation rates of women so dramatically, there has been a decline in the number and proportion of women as coaches and athletic administrators. In addition to the glaring pay gap that exists between coaches of men's teams and coaches of women's teams, men who coach women's teams have higher salaries than women coaching women's teams. Women also have fewer opportunities than men as athletic trainers, referees, sports journalists, sports information directors, and other adjunct positions.

Myth 6: A Professional Sports Career Provides Economic Security for Life

Even among those who attain a career in professional sport, fame and fortune are in short supply. Of course, some athletes make an income from salaries and endorsements that, if invested wisely, provides financial security for life. Some highly paid athletes, however, do not invest wisely. *Sports Illustrated* reports that 78 percent of former NFL players were bankrupt or were under financial distress two years after retirement as were 60 percent of NBA players within five years of retirement. The reasons typically are one or another of lifestyle, divorce, low financial literacy, and bad business ventures.²³ But many athletes just do

not make that much money in their short careers. While average salaries are enormous, many major league baseball players receive at or near the minimum of \$414,000. For those who do not make the big leagues (there is room for only 750), playing in the minor leagues is anything but lucrative. Professional football does not even have a minor league program (other than the colleges). There are also problems with alcohol, depression, and the physical and mental consequences of playing violent sports (see chapter 5).

Moreover, the average length of a professional career in a team sport is about five years (and only three-and-a-half years for professional football players). Marginal athletes in individual sports, such as golf, tennis, boxing, and bowling, struggle financially. They must cover their travel and health expenses, health insurance, equipment, and the like with no guaranteed paycheck. And that brief sports career diverts the young athletes from developing other career skills and experiences that would benefit them throughout life.

A career as a professional athlete is short, even for those who extend their playing days beyond the average. Ex-professional athletes leave sport, on an average, when they are in their twenties or early thirties, at a time when their nonathlete peers have begun to establish themselves in occupations leading toward retirement in forty years or so. For those few with longer athletic longevity (say to age thirty-seven or so), they have just put off the inevitable.²⁴ What are the ex-professional athletes to do with their remaining productive years?

Exiting a sports career can be relatively smooth or it can be difficult.²⁵ Some athletes plan ahead, preparing themselves for other careers in sport (coaching, scouting, administering) or for a nonsport occupation. Others do not prepare themselves for this abrupt change. They graduate from college but do not spend the off-seasons apprenticing nonsport jobs.

Exiting the athlete role is difficult for many because they lose: (1) what they have focused on for most of their lives; (2) the primary source of their personal identity; (3) their physical prowess; (4) adulation bordering on worship from others; (5) the money and the perquisites of fame; (6) the camaraderie with teammates; (7) the intense "highs" of competition; and (8) status (for most ex-athletes). As a result of these losses, many ex-professional athletes have trouble adjusting to

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life after sport.²⁶ For most, the transition to the real world is a big step down. Big-time pro athletes are pampered like royalty. They fly first class while hired hands pay the bills and tote the luggage. High-powered executives and heads of state fawn over them. They are on a pedestal in the limelight. When they step off that pedestal, everything changes for the worse. Often retirement occurs because the athlete has "failed," that is, is demoted to nonstarter, is let go by management, or no longer meets the qualifications, such as not making the cut in tournament after tournament in golf. So, too, with athletes who stay too long, delaying retirement well past their prime, thus diminishing their legacy. These once successful athletes now face marginality, degradation, and the stigma of failure.²⁷

An athlete has some potential for a sport-related career after his or her playing days are over, such as coaching, managing, scouting, sports-casting, public relations, and administration. For all but superstars, however, the opportunities are severely limited. Racial minorities and women rarely attain such careers.

In summary, the evidence supports the contention that sports participation has limited potential as a social mobility escalator. The allure in its potential, however, remains strong, and this has at least two negative consequences. First, ghetto youngsters who devote their lives to the pursuit of athletic stardom are, except for the fortunate few, doomed to failure in sport and in the real world as well, since sports skills are essentially irrelevant to occupational placement and advancement. The second negative consequence is more subtle but is very important. Sport contributes to the ideology that legitimizes social inequalities and promotes the myth that all it takes to succeed is extraordinary effort. Sport sociologist George H. Sage makes this point forcefully:

Because sport is by nature meritocratic—that is, superior performance brings status and rewards—it provides convincing symbolic support for hegemonic [the dominant] ideology—that ambitious, dedicated, hard-working individuals, regardless of social origin, can achieve success and ascend in the social hierarchy, obtaining high status and material rewards, while those who don't move upward simply didn't work hard

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enough. Because the rags-to-riches athletes are so visible, the social mobility theme is maintained. This reflects the opportunity structure of society in general—the success of a few reproduces the belief in social mobility among the many.²⁸