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Golden Boy: An Analysis of ESPN’s Rhetoric

Individualism is an important factor throughout the world and has been growing steadily in the U.S. This push for individualism has been deeply ingrained in American society and will not let up. The very core of individualism is people *assuming* they are the center of their own universes (Wilkens & Sanford, pg. 29). It has been seen everywhere a person turns but, as of late, it has been seen in sports. Many people will say that all sports are team based and not individualistic at all. This statement is one hundred percent correct because it takes a team to win a game or event, but on the other hand it is also very individualistic when it comes to stats and interpreting stats. A person could be the best player on the team and stand out the whole season and that player will be praised with most valuable player awards and things of that nature. Therefore, sports, over the years, have grown much more individualistic as players are praised for their individual talents.

I, being a baseball player, have noticed it myself. In my senior year of high school I was awarded the MVP and the Defensive Player of the Year awards. I took them graciously, but I was wondering why they gave individual awards in a team sport. I was always a team player and would do whatever it took in order for my team to succeed. It’s a different generation of players now; they focus on individual achievement more than the actual team. Sports itself is embracing a new generation which focuses more on the individualistic culture. It’s increasingly hard to find a team player especially in a culture that is shrouded in stats and individual events.

Before I jump into how ESPN has rhetorically created an individualistic culture, let me define what individualism actually is. When I use the term “individualism” I am referring to the worldview as clarified in *Hidden Worldviews*. Wilkens and Sanford convey individualism as a basic belief that screams about a person being the “center of his or her own universe” and is their “primary reality” (pg. 27). In layman’s terms, individualism is all about the self and the fact that a person should focus their attention and efforts towards something that will better an aspect about themselves; a self-centered individual.

This individualism seen around sports has been embraced and people are focused only on big name players instead of the whole team. ESPN, the self-proclaimed “worldwide leader in sports,” has also embraced this self-absorbed take on sports. ESPN’s flagship show, *Sportscenter,* recaps games that have happened in the past day or so along with sports news. In covering such a wide topic, they focus their time on mostly the big name teams and players (Burns & Kian and Mondello). ESPN continues to cover only certain teams and sports, but the rhetoric they use controls what they promote. This is a major discrepancy in what ESPN claims and what they advocate: they claim they’re the worldwide leader in sports but they don’t specify which sports because, more often than not, they only cover certain sports (Banagan). Therefore, ESPN’s rhetoric has created an individualistic view of sports as well as a bias towards certain sports and certain teams.

Individualism, as stated before, is seen everywhere in the U.S., but it can also be seen in ESPN. This makes most ESPN watchers see only certain players during the span of time they watch. Lebron James is often their focus when they use twenty six minutes to speak about the NBA and its playoffs (Gaines). James is an amazing basketball player and ESPN exploits his talents so viewers often only see him. During his free agency in 2010, James was deciding between two teams, the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Miami Heat. He eventually picked to move to Miami but not before collaborating with ESPN to do an hour long segment entitled “The Decision.” It only took about thirty seconds to actually ask James the fateful question but ESPN set aside a full hour exclusive in order to hear the words “I’ll be taking my talents to South Beach” (Banagan).

James is undeniably a great basketball player and, at points, deserves that amount of coverage, but ESPN individualizes him and is mostly their focus at times no matter what other sporting news is going on around them. During a study conducted by a Deadspin.com contributor in which he spent an hour a day watching ESPN’s flagship show, *Sportscenter*, he put numbers to the bias and individualistic values that people have been pointing out since the start of ESPN’s existence. He published that, during his 23,000 minutes of watching *Sportscenter*, James was mentioned about 2,000 times while the next closest athlete, Kobe Bryant, was mentioned only about 1,400 times (Burns). This stat undoubtedly proves that ESPN’s rhetoric and the way they design a show creates an individualistic representation of sports. ESPN puts their main focus on one certain athlete and gets people to talk about that one person; they say his or her name so much and mention his or her stats so many times that viewers begin to talk about that athlete because that is what is stuck in their heads from that episode (Banagan). ESPN and *Sportscenter* focus so much on a certain person that they force an individualistic view of sports and of teams.

ESPN and its flagship show has undeniably created an individualistic culture among viewers, but their focus on certain athletes and teams have also created an extreme bias towards certain teams and sports with an emphasis on men. As stated before, ESPN is the “worldwide leader in sports” but they do not cover *all* sports. ESPN does not practice what they preach because they cover mostly *men’s* sports. In a progressive society, they do not show equality. In a study done by Edward Kian and Michael Mondello, it examined how women’s sports are represented on the internet. They examined all sports articles on ESPN.com. Of the one hundred and seventy articles on the website, only sixty-four of them were about women’s sports, which is just about 37.6%. Though women’s sports are not as popular as men’s sports, it is still obvious that ESPN supports that bias and does not cover women as much as men.

Furthermore, Sportscenter does not *mention* women as much as they do men. As said before, a study was done by a Deadspin.com contributor in which he watched 23,000 minutes of Sportscenter. He found that Lebron James was mentioned 2,000 times and he was the top person to be mentioned. Of the top twenty athletes that were mentioned, none of them were women. Not one woman was in the top twenty mentioned athletes over the course of 23,000 minutes of Sportscenter (Burns). Sportscenter and ESPN’s rhetoric not only creates an individualistic view of sports, but it also upholds the hegemony ofvirility.

ESPN’s discourse, by covering certain sports for a long period of time, has created a sense of favoritism toward men. Certain sports, given the season, will be covered more than usual and can take up most, if not all, of the show. In the same study done by Deadspin, it is explained that certain sports are investigated more thoroughly than others. The NFL got twenty-three percent of the total minutes covered by the study while the NHL and Soccer combined to cover a measly four percent of the minutes (Burns). Obviously, the way ESPN frames their shows and the way they speak create a bias toward certain sports. Though out of season sports might not have a lot of news to be covered, it is discernable that ESPN does have its individual privileges.

On the surface, ESPN is a great network and Sportscenter is a great show to keep up with all sports, but as it is prodded, the faults begin to fall out from underneath the blanket that ESPN drapes over its viewers’ eyes. The way ESPN speaks and builds their show makes it clear that they have hypocrisies in their midst. ESPN is going as far as hiring another firm to figure out what type of information they are disseminating and how they are biased (Banagan). They are taking steps to help figure out what they are doing wrong, but the viewers do have to realize that ESPN creates an unhealthy view of sports; individualism and bias towards men is not what sports is all about. Most sports are team based and do not deserve to be broken down into individual achievements. As many people know, one player does not make a team.

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