

## Super Slaves

### Breeding and Controlling the Modern Black American Male through Sports

*Steven W. Thrasher*

During slavery, they used to take the biggest, strongest slaves and breed them, and try their best to make big, strong super slaves—and there's evidence of that today, like the NFL for instance. NFL stands for Nigger Fuckin' Large. They bred the slaves, and this is why black people dominate every physical activity in the United States of America, OK? We're only 10 percent of the population, [but] we're 90 percent of the Final Four.

—Chris Rock, *Never Scared*

Over the past two years, first as a journalist and then as an academic, I have had the opportunity to report on three young black men from Missouri, all named Michael: Michael Johnson, also known as “Tiger Mandingo,” who is serving a thirty-year sentence for criminal HIV transmission; Michael Brown, whose death at the hands of Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in 2014 helped set off the Black Lives Matter movement; and Michael Sam, the first openly gay college football player to be drafted by the National Football League.<sup>1</sup> Each young man's black body has been valued, judged, and reviled for its physical ability. Comedian Chris Rock spoke in his 2004 *Never Scared* tour about how black men have literally been bred for maximum profit since slavery and that this breeding has created athletic bodies that can create maximum profit in sports stadiums as effectively as they once did in cotton fields.<sup>2</sup> Rock's humor riffs on the absurdity that athletics, often seen as a potential source

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of liberty for black men, rely on base forms of human husbandry that were birthed by slavery.

The black bodies of Sam and Johnson were assessed for how much they could be capitalized through sports for white individuals and white-controlled institutions. Sports validated Johnson's athletic body for Lindenwood University, where he was a wrestler, until it was known that he was sexually active and HIV positive. Sports also validated Sam's athletic body to the extent that it could generate profits for his owners, who would trade it in a fashion not unlike how slave bodies were once traded. There are, historically, moments when black athletes can express their agency in this process with profound results, such as when the Mizzou Tigers at the University of Missouri (who include Sam among their alumni) went on strike over racial issues in the fall of 2015 and helped trigger the resignation of the school's top leadership, but this is unusual.<sup>3</sup>

Conversely, Brown's large athletic body—invalidated and uncontrolled outside the arena of sports—was acknowledged for its physical “mandingo” prowess and then subsequently destroyed as a “demon” threat.<sup>4</sup> Each of these Michaels exists on a spectrum (which historically has included black athletes, inmates, slaves, and casualties of police violence) where his worth is determined by his physical size and ability. This essay argues that a variety of American social institutions (the educational system, the criminal justice system, collegiate sports conferences, and professional sports leagues) use sports as the frame for judging the worth of young black men, prior to rewarding, controlling, or destroying them.

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When Johnson made it to college, his body was of value, since it could generate revenue wrestling for Lindenwood University. When it no longer could, his body was turned over to the state of Missouri, where it will generate revenue for the Department of Corrections.

In the spring of 2014, I traveled to St. Charles, Missouri—an overwhelmingly white suburb to the west of St. Louis—to meet the black former college wrestler Johnson.<sup>5</sup> He was better known as Tiger Mandingo, his online persona.<sup>6</sup> The then twenty-two-year-old was being held in the St. Charles County Correctional Facility, awaiting trial on charges that he had knowingly transmitted HIV to two male sexual partners and exposed four others to it. While news of Tiger Mandingo's arrest in 2013 had gone viral, prior to my extensive feature story on him for BuzzFeed no journalist had actually interviewed him.<sup>7</sup> Previous stories merely repeated the prosecutor's charges, while reifying dangerous misconceptions about HIV criminalization.<sup>8</sup> One of the biggest dangers this initial coverage created was that it obscured how prosecuting HIV as a criminal act makes transmission more frequent and harms public health, because increased stigma makes people less likely to get tested and more likely to transmit the virus.

Johnson had been a wrestler in Lindenwood University's nationally recognized collegiate athletics program, in division 2 of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). When he was recruited, Johnson had just come in first place in his division at the National Junior College Wrestling Championships in 2012. It appeared, in my dealings with him in 2014, that he had been recruited to Lindenwood even though he could not read or write. According to Johnson's friends and former teammates, his inability to read was well known to his school and to his athletic department. He had a "handler" who would take him around and take care of administrative matters for him. A former teammate of Johnson's, upset about the 2014 athletic scandal at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, described to me how a professor watered down questions for an exam for Johnson and administered a test (given in written format to everyone else) orally to Johnson, just so he could pass.<sup>9</sup>

But Lindenwood University denied any knowledge of his reading problems to me. In an interview, spokesman Eric Stuhler said, "We see no basis for an assertion that Mr. Johnson is functionally illiterate."<sup>10</sup> The administration would not address what seemed obvious to everyone who saw Johnson's attempts at reading and writing, until charges were filed against him.

Then, Lindenwood did not seem compelled to even confer due process upon Johnson. The university viewed him as a valuable recruit in 2012, and its administrators appeared glad to have had control over his body as a valuable commodity for their athletic program for as long as it was convenient. But the very day he was arrested for criminal HIV transmission—not the day of a conviction almost two years later, or even the day of an arraignment hearing a few months later, but the day he was arrested—Lindenwood University expelled him. Johnson's body was no longer of use to it, and the university transferred control of him over to the St. Charles County Department of Corrections.

While these actions exposed a Foucauldian mode of nakedly exploiting bio-power over Johnson, Lindenwood is by no means unique regarding such behavior. Illiterate athletes can still be useful to a university seeking to exploit the bodies of young people who may not be academically ready for college but who are athletically ready to earn revenue. As a class action lawsuit against the NCAA and UNC Chapel Hill, filed on January 22, 2015, charged:

The NCAA sat idly by, permitting big-time college sports programs to operate as diploma mills that compromise educational opportunities and the future job prospects of student-athletes for the sake of wins and revenues. As the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, a prominent independent investigative body, observed nearly fifteen years ago, "Power struggles for control of big-time football, revenue distribution, and other matters reflect a culture dominated by competitive rather than academic concerns, and one that often ignores the welfare of the athletes representing their institutions."<sup>11</sup>

The lawsuit alleged that, among other things, UNC Chapel Hill faked “independent study” courses where students would turn in papers that they thought were being graded but which were never even seen by a professor. It is a particularly egregious irony that the fake independent study classes were Afro-American or African American courses. The lawsuit also alleged that the NCAA mimics well what the National Football League (NFL) does perfectly: it exploits the bodies of black athletes for the profit of those who run it. The NFL historically has done this even more expertly, maintaining tax-exempt status until 2015 without the veneer of education (and while generating billions in revenue and hundreds of millions in profits).<sup>12</sup> The effect is the same: black athletes generate revenue for teams or colleges, headed up by largely white team owners or collegiate boards of directors. For Johnson, he earned revenue for his university without ever even earning a diploma himself.

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Recent scholarship suggests that the historic role of slavery is more integral to the contemporary economic inequities that African Americans currently face than has been previously assumed. As economist Gregory Clark wrote in 2014 in the *New York Times*:

To a striking extent, your overall life chances can be predicted not just from your parents’ status but also from your great-great-great-grandparents’. The recent study suggests that 10 percent of variation in income can be predicted based on your parents’ earnings. In contrast, my colleagues and I estimate that *50 to 60 percent of variation in overall status is determined by your lineage*. The fortunes of high-status families inexorably fall, and those of low-status families rise, toward the average—what social scientists call “regression to the mean”—but the process can take *10 to 15 generations (300 to 450 years)*, much longer than most social scientists have estimated in the past.<sup>13</sup> (Emphasis added.)

In post-Fordist America, where manufacturing careers increasingly do not exist, there are generally four ways black men can attempt to interrupt this sociologically bleak reality and achieve access to capital: crime, entertainment, college, or sports. Low-level crime rarely generates lasting wealth. Black entertainment (especially music) is beloved in the United States and generates vast revenues, but rarely for the artist creating it. And for the few black people who manage to go to and finish college, there are cruel realities: black Americans who go to college are about as likely to get a job as white persons who drop out of high school are. In recent history, black people have remained twice as likely to be unemployed regardless of education levels.<sup>14</sup>

Sports often appear to be the most seductive path away from the financial legacy of slavery for young black men with athletic bodies, even though, ironically,

the execution of sports can look a lot like slavery. The odds of sports leading to wealth are long, even when used to finance a college education. While most college athletes' careers don't end as spectacularly as Johnson's did, only about half of black college student athletes even graduate and less than 2 percent of college athletes ever play professionally.<sup>15</sup>

Even then, as Sam (who had been a star defensive lineman at Missouri State University before the NFL draft) found out, going pro is no guarantee of having a long career. Sam was cut first by the St. Louis Rams shortly after being the first openly gay NFL player drafted in history; then the Dallas Cowboys also dropped him shortly after he signed with them.<sup>16</sup> He did a stint on the reality TV show *Dancing with the Stars* and was picked up by the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League on a two-year contract, but he left the team for "personal issues" before the start of the season, returning for one game and then leaving for good.<sup>17</sup>

According to the NFL Players Association, the average career of a player is only about 3.3 years.<sup>18</sup> It is dangerous, short work, and the NFL's racial demographics reflect an apartheid scale of power: according to FiveThirtyEight, 66 percent of NFL players are black and 97 percent of NFL owners are white.<sup>19</sup> This was different, William C. Rhoden quotes Kenneth Shropshire observing in *\$40 Million Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, when there were black

football leagues: "Once integration occurred, black sports team ownership completely disappeared. . . . Integration, a godsend for black athletes, was a disaster for black owners . . . [and for every other] black person involved in sports—coaches, owners, trainers, accountants, lawyers, secretaries and so on—except the precious on-the-field talent."<sup>20</sup> The result in sports, Rhoden argues, is a situation best understood by the example of the plantation and its exploitation of black bodies for white profit. As a viral photo meme on Twitter described the NFL draft in 2014, there are disturbing visual similarities between the annual parade of choosing new (and mostly black) players and a slave auction (fig. 1).<sup>21</sup>

*Rolling Stone* and *Men's Journal* writer Matt Taibbi has written

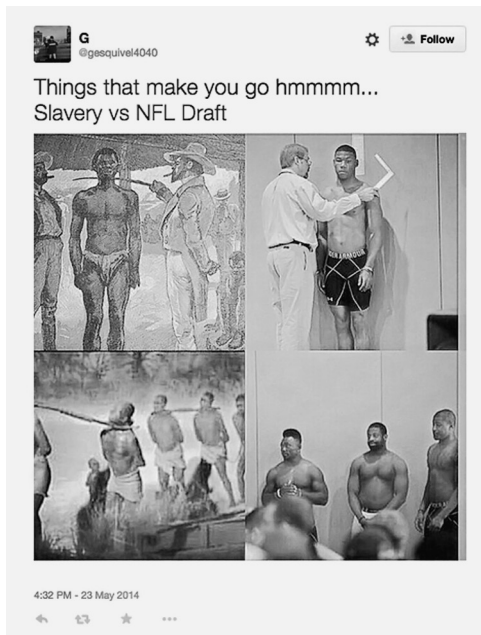


Figure 1. Posted on Twitter May 13, 2014 by user @gesquivel4040, retrieved January 28, 2015, <https://twitter.com/gesquivel4040/status/469923951808753665>

that the NFL draft has a “creepy slave-auction vibe and armies of drooling, flesh-peddling scouts . . . looking for raw gladiatorial muscle whose sweat-drenched faces will be hidden under helmets as coaches drive them to be rapidly ground into hamburger. . . . These are bloodless corporate enterprises using advanced scientific and economic metrics to measure the material worth of human flesh down to the half-pound, the 16th of an inch.”<sup>22</sup> The draft is merely the first step in an institutionalized process in which white owners make mad bank off black players’ flesh—most of whom won’t be stars and many of whom will be seriously harmed. The parallels are especially disturbing between slavery and college athletics, where labor physically dangerous to the black body receives no salary. According to the *Atlantic*, the NCAA has 20,718 injuries per year, which includes some 4,000 knee injuries (among the most common) and 841 spinal injuries (along with head injuries, among the most serious).<sup>23</sup>

There are rare times when black athletes are able to leverage their power within the neoliberal university to enact powerful political change. In the fall of 2015, the group Concerned Student 1950 began protesting for racial justice reforms at the University of Missouri’s flagship Columbia campus, where Sam had previously been a player. Eleven students began the protests, and the stakes grew higher as a tent city formed in the university’s main quad and graduate student Jonathan Butler went on and vowed to continue a hunger strike until the school’s president, Tim Wolfe, resigned. Then the Tigers football team announced they, too, were going on strike from practicing and playing. The Tigers, mostly black men, were days away from a nationally televised football game, giving them economic leverage over the school and leading to solidarity strikes by graduate students and professors. When I reported about the reactions on campus as the university’s board accepted the president’s resignation, there was widespread jubilation about one of the few protests in the Black Lives Matter movement to result in a win (and not be in reaction to a death), along with much acknowledgment of the role of the football players in achieving the victory.<sup>24</sup>

At the professional level, players are seriously hurt so often that the NFL itself publishes a list of injured players every week, which the *New York Times* reports includes more than two hundred concussions per year.<sup>25</sup> While the long-term effects of those head injuries are not fully known, recent scholarship suggests that they are prevalent and profound. Scientists at Boston University, in a recently released first-ever study of dozens of former NFL players’ brains, found that “of the 79 deceased NFL players examined, 76 [96 percent] showed evidence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE,” a form of brain injury.<sup>26</sup>

A majority black fleet of NFL players are sent into this type of physical danger, day in and day out, knowingly harmed and explicitly used to generate capital for nearly exclusively white owners. The boards of college athletics are not necessarily better, the NCAA lawsuit argues, at exploiting “African-American college athletes in revenue-producing sports” to similar ends.<sup>27</sup>

Controlling the bodies of black collegiate athletes is paramount, and schools (like the NFL) use literacy and speech, or physical force when needed, to help facilitate that control. Lindenwood University's assessment that it could not control the wrestler Johnson's physical body when he had HIV and remained sexually active helped facilitate the physical takeover of Johnson's body by the St. Charles County Department of Corrections. But previously, in assigning him a "handler" and allegedly allowing a professor to give him a test orally, the university had already been asserting a soft control over his life. It created a dependency and made it so that, knowing Johnson couldn't access literacy (much as the NCAA lawsuit condemns UNC Chapel Hill for), he would have everything to lose and nothing to gain if he ever wanted to challenge the university in any way. This is not unlike the reasoning for why slaves, in Missouri and elsewhere, were kept from learning to read in practice and in law.<sup>28</sup> The price of this devil's bargain was minimal to Lindenwood University: it would have reveled in any success it may have achieved at Johnson's hands, and it immediately washed its hands of Johnson when he was merely accused of a crime. (The state of Missouri has henceforth controlled his speech and body.)

Sam's body was similarly contained: he was effectively silenced while in the NFL. When I was covering Sam as a reporter, it became obvious to me that the NFL controlled him: his body, his expressed thoughts, and his actions. I was never allowed to interview him, even though I was a black, gay writer for a national outlet; the NFL did not want him talking to reporters, except in a controlled press conference, and certainly not to an openly gay journalist. I did manage to connect with two straight players for the St. Louis Rams who were eager to speak with me about how they planned to welcome Sam as the first gay player to their team, but they told me they had no freedom to speak unless allowed by their owner. (The Rams declined our request to speak to one another.)

The NFL draft allows audiences to see physically strong black men bought, sold, and traded much as in a slave auction. The NCAA collegiate sports league allows students and fans to watch big, strong black men wrestling on mats and battling on fields, while claiming to educate them. Both allow spectators to watch one of their biggest fears—large black men—in a controlled setting. Both the NCAA and the NFL condition sports fans to see large black men as physically intimidating but also as controllable under the right conditions. These actions are examples of the theory of *mandingoism*, which can be applied to black athletes but also to Brown. American consciousness of mandingoism, such as it is, is rooted in the misguided belief that slaves once fought to the death, which never happened. But that specific fantasy, replayed in the 1975 film *Mandingo*, as well as in pornography and in Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained*, fuels the aspect of mandingoism that looks the most like watching black football players tackle each other or wrestlers pin each other.

Mandingoism is rooted in white men's patriarchal and racist fear that black men will "take" their most valued "property": white women. Thus, in the American mandingoist imagination, a black male body is large, scary, and something to be feared. But mandingoism isn't merely sexual or even physical in the athletic sense. There was nothing sexually intimidating, for example, about twelve-year-old Tamir Rice playing with a toy gun in a park. Yet mandingoism has so conditioned American police that, when they see even a black child playing with a mere toy representation of one of the most popular of American sports (recreational shooting), he is so threatening in their imagination that they must kill him. This thinking is reflected in new scholarship that shows that white Americans assume people with black-sounding names are physically larger than they actually are.<sup>29</sup>

If whiteness "emerges from the governance of property," as historian Nikhil Pal Singh argues, then the policing of blackness has also emerged as a form of black bodies being considered *as* property.<sup>30</sup> In many respects, the link between black bodies as slaves and black bodies as carceral subjects—the link between how black bodies have been commodified in America's most nascent and most recent days—has been bridged through sports. The NFL and the NCAA have monetized black bodies as "beasts of burden" that are property, not human, kept in line for profit through the social control of sports.

Brown's large black body did not stand a chance outside the social control of sports. His tragic end is not unlike that of many black men encountered outside of sports, in a society where sports have conditioned people to fear them: he was violently attacked and destroyed.

When Officer Wilson said of Brown's face that "it looked like a demon[s]," after he had already shot him, he was using the same type of language that white parties in power (slave owners, sports broadcasters, college sports recruiters, team owners) with charge over black bodies have long used.<sup>31</sup> But off the field or out of the ring, when a black male with a similarly "menacing" large body is seen outside the confines that white team owners and spectators alike have been conditioned to expect, white men freak out. Even armed white men freak out at unarmed black men, women, or children. Wilson had a gun and a car, and he was supposedly afraid for his life from the "demon" Brown. Unable to control him with the softer powers that Lindenwood University used to control Johnson and the Rams used to control Sam, Wilson was conditioned to control Brown's body with mortal force.

Though the exchange was not on a ball field, Brown's brief but history-influencing encounter with Wilson was influenced by the sense of control white men have felt compelled to have over black bodies since slavery, which has been perfected in the past few decades via collegiate and professional sports. All three Michaels appear along an American continuum, in which the techniques of sports resemble those used from the eras of slavery to mass incarceration, to control black bodies and extract as much value out of them for white profit as possible.



To collegiate athletics, sports allowed Lindenwood University to extract profit from one Michael who could barely read, passing him along for value extraction to the Missouri Department of Corrections when his collegiate value was tapped out.

To professional football, sports allowed two NFL teams, one CFL team, and a reality TV show to extract profit from another Michael, until his marketable value is fully depleted.

And to the criminal justice system, lacking the controlling frame offered by sports, another Michael's body was rendered frightening and expendable.

### Notes

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