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Review of *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide: Black Athletes at BYU and Beyond*, by Darron T. Smith

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- Title** *Review of *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide: Black Athletes at BYU and Beyond*, by Darron T. Smith*
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making the Greek accessible in transliteration to nonspecialists, an index of scriptural citations will not be left out, so as to maximize the utility of the volume. Above any shortcomings of the work, Frederick is to be commended for advancing the conversation in a concrete and deliberate way, and for setting a constructive tone for future intertextual research.

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Darron T. Smith. *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide: Black Athletes at BYU and Beyond*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 2016.

Reviewed by Richard Kimball

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ON THE CUSP OF THE NCAA MEN’S BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT in March 2011, Brigham Young University announced the suspension of star center Brandon Davies for violating the school’s honor code. Until that point in the season, the African American Davies had helped the Cougars to a number-three ranking in the national polls and had established himself as an outstanding sophomore center. The suspension became fodder for commentators on every side and spent a short time in the national spotlight. Davies’s reinstatement for the following season prompted

it as an unintentional oversight, but one that is exceedingly unfortunate, especially in a volume on intertextuality and allusion to the Gospel of John.

much less discussion and seemed to forestall further dialogue about the handling of the suspension and the ongoing difficulties for African American athletes at BYU. The situation, however, inspired Darron T. Smith, a sociologist and one-time adjunct faculty member at BYU, to “bring to light the complicated history of race and religion in the Mormon Church and the hypocrisy illuminated through the medium of sport” (p. vii). *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide: Black Athletes at BYU and Beyond* takes us well past the Davies dismissal to consider the nexus of race, religion, sport, and economic inequality in American society writ large, using BYU as an exemplar of the nation’s colleges and universities. The school’s sponsoring institution, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, likewise represents the quintessential national white organization and acts as Smith’s “litmus test for the American experience.”

Smith builds his arguments on the “systemic racism theory” of Joe R. Feagin, which posits that racism is built around white “racial frames”—the constellation of “racist images, attitudes, ideology, emotions, habits, and actions” (p. 32) used by white Americans to “perpetuate and obscure matters of racial discrimination.” This tradition of discrimination “limits the opportunities of African Americans while promoting [white Americans’] own continued race-based advantages and control over key societal domains, including education, health care, and certainly the sport-industrial complex” (p. 33). In short, the “white racial frame” is the “the philosophical justification of black marginalization employed by white, privileged decision makers” (p. 29).

Always mindful of the “white racial frame,” Smith describes various “encounters and unequal relationships of power that blacks had with whites” throughout American history (p. 34). The book provides a primer on how the “white racial frame” has operated in American and Mormon history more than an in-depth, robust examination of the relationship between sports and religion at BYU. To contextualize his analysis of African American athletes at BYU around the turn of the twenty-first century, Smith sets the table with a series of sections outlining the origins of racism, the racialization of blacks in sports, the championing of black separatists and the reintegration of American

sports, and the demonization of blacks throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition. A chapter dedicated to the “white racial framing of blacks in Mormon theology” is followed by a chapter on campus unrest and the revolt of black athletes in the 1960s. After a chapter on LDS attitudes and teachings regarding civil rights, we finally reach Smith’s wheelhouse—the dismissal of Brandon Davies and the unjust treatment of black athletes at BYU in the last twenty-five years.

Smith should be commended for taking on the herculean task of trying to unravel the complex intertwining of race, sports, inequality, and religion. Unfortunately, the author’s reach exceeds his grasp in one of his central contentions. In order to broaden the applicability of the book’s findings, Smith claims that the Mormon experience is “as quintessentially American as apple pie.” Such a designation will likely stick in many reader’s throats, despite the justification that the “Church shares with other white organizations the same dominant narrative of the so-called protestant work ethic embodied within the framework of individualism” (p. 3). Certainly, the church has moved inexorably toward the American mainstream, but it hardly represents, or even reflects, the standard American sect, let alone the typical American.

When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide hits its stride in chapter 6, Smith’s focus shifts to the exploitation of African American athletes at BYU, particularly the double standard regarding honor code infractions. Black athletes have been treated as “reluctant houseguests at BYU”—purposefully undereducated regarding the honor code and ill prepared for the campus environment (p. 79). In part, they have been set up to fail by coach-recruiters who soft-pedal the strictures of life under the honor code. Ronney Jenkins, a football player in the late 1990s, remembers that while he was being recruited, the honor code “wasn’t something that we sat down and really spoke about, got into detail about” (p. 106). Set apart by race and religion, these athletes faced a familiar double bind without fully understanding the rules of the game.

Much of Smith’s information about honor code infractions is admittedly anecdotal. A handful of quotes, supposition about what happened behind closed ecclesiastical doors, and information reaped from public

records provide the bulk of Smith's evidence. Such limitations, while unfortunate, are understandable in light of the confidential nature of the information the author needs. Some of the assumptions are quite telling and insightful, in spite of the lack of transparency in honor code disciplinary matters. For example, his analysis of the "Baker's dozen" incident, when within the space of a year twelve African Americans were suspended from the football team, with several of them dismissed from the university, uncovers a blatant racial double standard. During the same period, only two nonblack athletes received similar punishments—one white and one Polynesian. According to Smith, black football and basketball players are disciplined at a ratio of ten to one in comparison to their white teammates. It seems eminently reasonable to conclude that "blacks and whites are 'handled' differently with respect to the honor code" (p. 112). To buttress that assertion, Smith compares the stories of Teag Whiting and Devon Blackmon. In 2001 Whiting, a football player and white Mormon, was arrested for participating in a brawl and fleeing from the police. He was suspended for one game. Thirteen years later, the black and non-Mormon wide receiver Devon Blackmon received a one-game suspension for wearing a pair of earrings during summer term in 2014, an infraction of the university's dress and grooming standards. Smith notes that BYU spokesperson Carri Jenkins admitted in a 2004 interview, "It's extremely rare for a player to be suspended for dress and grooming violations" (p. 115). The comparisons speak to a truth that black athletes are disciplined more harshly than their white counterparts, but I am nagged by the composition of the comparison. Is it fair to compare an arrest in 2001 (without noting the final disposition of the case) to a seemingly minor violation in 2014, bridging the gap with a quotation from 2004? There is something there; I am just not convinced that, in this case, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Smith doesn't leave readers without hope, however. He outlines a series of changes that could help BYU be more welcoming and fair to African American, non-Mormon athletes (only men are discussed in the text, but presumably the changes would help black non-Mormon

female athletes too). BYU would do well to heed his calls for change: (1) create and maintain public records regarding the graduation trends of black and white athletes in an effort to promote accountability through transparency, (2) create an inclusive environment designed around helping black non-Mormon athletes to succeed on their own terms, (3) partner with black churches in Salt Lake City to provide mentors who could shepherd the athletes through the transition to a new culture, and (4) create a volunteer sponsor-family program to provide support and a familial environment away from the playing field. Ultimately, Smith notes, “BYU must get more creative and accepting rather than secretive and punitive” (p. 151).

In many ways, Brandon Davies is held up as the epitome of the disciplinary differential between white and black, Mormon and non-Mormon athletes at BYU. His was the most public shaming, and it objectified Davies into everything that was right or wrong in college sports. His penance played out on the road to the Final Four. Even this case, as clear-cut as it seems, doesn't fit comfortably into Smith's argument. Because Davies is an African American and a Mormon, his situation throws a wrench into the theoretical works. What frames of judgment capture the black Mormon player raised in Provo? In the end, *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide* convincingly argues for the double bind that black non-Mormon athletes face at BYU. Without the ability to peek behind the curtains of the Honor Code Office and the athletic department, however, we may never know why.

Richard Kimball is an associate professor in the history department at Brigham Young University. His most recent book, *Legends Never Die: Athletes and Their Afterlives in Modern America*, was published by Syracuse University Press in 2017.