
SHIELDS, DAVID. *Black Planet: Facing Race during an NBA Season*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1999. Pp. 223. \$23.00 cb.

David Shields provides an interesting analysis of race in the United States through his chronological study of the Seattle Supersonics basketball team during the 1994-1995 season. Shields, a professor of English at the University of Washington and a fan of basketball, delves into issues of racism, power, and relations among professional black basketball players. In diary form, *Black Planet* guides readers through a variety of scenarios, causing readers to evaluate how White Americans view Black Americans, albeit through professional basketball.

Early on, the author focuses on his favorite Sonic player, Gary Payton. Shields questions his draw to Payton; why he puts Payton on a pedestal and worships him in a sense. This, along with a portion of unnecessary references to the author's sex life (even when he is in intimate settings with his wife, Payton comes to mind), and skipping back and forth between topics, diminishes otherwise insightful information.

The strength of the book lies in its numerous examples of the power struggles between black players and white players, coaches, fans, and members of the media. We learn that on some teams blacks will not let their white counterparts touch the ball, and that many black players listen only to their black coaches. Shields discusses the ways in which players inform coaches who is really in control of the team and the game. Like other people of fame, the players decide if, when, and how interviews will occur and how they will act during the interview. Frequently, the players do not cooperate. Players interact with fans when they want to and on their own terms, frequently snubbing a high-five hand, refusing to acknowledge a white actor, or ignoring a fan attempting to return a ball. Intentionally misusing clichés during interviews or talk shows, refusing to smile in team photos, acting cocky, and wearing black shoes for the playoffs are several ways in which the players demonstrate the "coolness" so loved by their fans.

Differences between blacks and whites appear throughout the text. Shields notes that whites constitute nearly everyone involved with the game (paternalistic coaches,

referees, fans, reporters, broadcasters), while nearly all the players are black. And, fans continue to perceive white players as less physical than black players. Yet, several examples demonstrate blacks showing respect for whites. A black usher at a Sonics game acknowledges Shields as more than a fan, rather a white "brother." Gary Payton displays genuine respect for opponent John Stockton, and Detlef Schrempf maintains respect from his black, Sonic teammates because he plays the game hard.

At several junctures, the text alludes to the behavior of whites towards black players in the NBA as retribution for slavery. Race causes whites to act strange at times, states Shields. The irony is "in the NBA, black men rule, so we admire them; everywhere else in America we're afraid of them" (p. 210). On the other hand, Shields questions whether blacks take advantage of white sensitivity toward their history, and he suggests that some blacks try to see how guilty they can make whites feel. Several events mentioned by the author cause the reader to reflect on the separate roles society places on blacks and whites. A television advertisement for Champion features a white locker room attendant cleaning up a Chicago Bulls locker room. The Seattle Mariners mascot, the Moose, pretends to shine the shoes of the black referee and what results is an obviously uneasy situation for the referee.

Finally, the book provides interesting examples of how stereotyping of blacks as animals, criminals, or physical specimens is used for advertising and merchandising. A trading card company displays Shaquille O'Neal as a toad. A poster given to Sonics fans reads, "Partners in Crime," and depicts Gary Payton, Kendall Gill, and Nate McMillan with scornful expressions, standing against a graffitied brick wall holding rope, a flashlight, and bag of balls. The *Seattle Times Sunday Magazine* uses a nearly naked black man holding a barbell to his head, mimicking Rodin's "The Thinker" to display "The Body Perfect" alluding to the black man's physicality.

The book is one that may require a second read to be fully appreciated. Shields forces his readers to think about racial issues—both in the past and the present, "us" versus "them," and the enigmatic nature of famous, black, professional basketball players. *Black Planet* provides students and scholars of history, sociology, and psychology greater insight into race and sport in America.

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