

2021

The Circle of Unity: The Power of Symbols in a Team Sport Context

Brendan O'Hallarn
Old Dominion University

Craig A. Morehead

Mark A. Slavich

Alicia M. Cintron

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/administration_pubs



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Social Justice Commons](#), and the [Sports Sciences Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

O'Hallarn, B., Morehead, C. A., Slavich, M. A., & Cintron, A. M. (2021). The circle of unity: The power of symbols in a team sport context. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 14(1), 115-141. <https://doi.org/0.17161/jis.v14i1.13367>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Administration at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Administration Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

The Circle of Unity: The power of symbols in a team sport context

Brendan O'Hallarn¹, Craig A. Morehead², Mark A. Slavich³,
and Alicia M. Cintron⁴

¹Old Dominion University, ²Indiana State University, ³Grand View University, ⁴University of Cincinnati

Modern-day political discord has led to a recent spate of athletes using their platform to make statements about America. One under-researched aspect to modern sport activism is the study of the symbols themselves, such as the controversial kneeling during the national anthem by National Football League players, statement-making pregame apparel worn by National Basketball Association stars, and other political statements. This case study examines a 2016 activist display by Old Dominion University's football team, known as the Circle of Unity. The display, performed before most games that season, began as a form of protest by team captains, and morphed into a gesture that was celebrated across the political spectrum. Through the lens of both Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), the current study seeks to uncover the impetus, meaning, and ultimate impact of the symbol on a variety of stakeholders. Examining the symbol used—players and coaches standing in a circle, facing out, holding hands and raising them to the sky—can further contextualize the challenging role that student-athletes have in finding their voice to speak on issues they care about in a divided America.

Keywords: athlete activism, politics in sport, symbolic interactionism, college football, Old Dominion University

Fans arriving for the kickoff of Old Dominion University's (ODU) football game against the University of Texas-San Antonio (UTSA) on September 24, 2016 were greeted with a curious sight. A few minutes before kickoff, fans witnessed ODU mingling in the stadium's north end zone, and after a few minutes of discussion, players and coaches fanned out in a circle around the end zone, clasping hands with the individual on both sides of them (Minium, 2016a). When the circle was complete, the players lifted their arms up over their heads in unison. Fans, initially confused at the gesture, eventually started a round of applause that grew in intensity as it continued. Immediately following the gesture, the players returned to their benches and the game began.

Following the game, fans and media learned of the rationale for the gesture, termed the "Circle of Unity" (COU). ODU head coach Bobby Wilder explained that his team's captains approached him the week prior to the game, expressing their



feelings of unease and discord about the shooting by police of a Black male, Keith Lamont Scott, who died after being shot four times by a Charlotte police officer (Yan, Zenteno, & Todd, 2016). This was the latest in a series of violent incidents involving police and Black men in America. The COU became a symbol in which ODU football players (and sometimes their opponents) could express their displeasure with societal injustices while maintaining the team's desire to create unity among the country. While an important gesture that permeated throughout the 2016 season, the COU was just the latest demonstration among athletes in recent years.

After the immense contributions and sacrifices by athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos (Carlos & Zirin, 2011), there was a noticeable decline of evocative political statements by athletes for several decades (Khan, 2012). In fact, sociologist and civil rights activist Dr. Harry Edwards (2016a) referred to the period between the 1970s and 2005 as a period of Black athletic activism "stagnation." In the early part of the 21st century, however, athletes have become more outspoken, motivated in part by the most prominent recent case of athlete activism—a series of National Football League (NFL) player demonstrations during the Star-Spangled Banner (Reilly, 2016), which spread throughout the League during the 2016 and 2017 seasons. This ignited a national conversation that continued for several years. Other activist displays included the decision of championship teams or individual team members choosing not to make the traditional White House visit (Shear, 2018), and the increasingly outspoken nature of renowned athletes such as LeBron James (James & Lombardo, 2016), Steph Curry (Dowd, 2016), and Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) players (Schmidt, 2018). Activism has also been seen at the college level with recent college athlete protests occurring at Grambling State University (Schroeder, 2013) and the University of Missouri (Yan et al., 2018). Many of the aforementioned examples stem from issues around tense and ever-present racial issues in America.

Besides exposing societal fault lines that cause individuals in society to pick sides, these high-profile statements have frequently been linked by something else—the use of symbols to convey a message. Such use of symbols was intended to motivate and organize behavior, a concept known as symbolic interactionism (SI; Stryker, 1980). The core principle of SI is that symbols enable humans to maintain a shared sense of meaning, while also offering the ability to challenge everyday perspectives and bring social change (Snow, 2001). Another observation which is evident in the predominance and publicity around these symbolic gestures is that they have frequently focused on the issue of race in America (Edwards, 2016a). Displays by Colin Kaepernick (Reilly, 2016) and those who support him, college athlete activism at the University of Missouri (Yan et al., 2018), and increased willingness of high profile athletes to venture into the political sphere (Marston, 2017), has been described by Harry Edwards and others as an "awakening" (Wiggins, 2014). Agyemang et al. (2010) advocated for more focus on such social issues in sport due to the importance of gaining understanding from multiple perspectives. Thus, in a time of heightened scrutiny of college athletics at all levels—from the behavior of scholarship athletes away from the field, to the prospect of compensating college athletes for commercial

use of their image (Dwyer, 2019)—activist statements by college athletes are worthy of examination.

Based upon the power of symbols and the impact of race on our political discourse within sport, the purpose of this study was to analyze the role of symbolism in the COU. The demonstration exhibited the impact nonverbal symbols can have in communicating athletes' desire to bring attention to social issues while also highlighting the limits of college athlete activism within the current construct of intercollegiate athletics. Analyzing the COU through the lenses of symbolic interactionism and critical race theory (CRT), as well as its potential impact on the community's view of the current political discourse, can demonstrate how college athletics' popularity will inevitably result in it being situated in the middle of topical societal discussions.

The following sections provide review of the impact of such symbols, examined through the lens of SI, with CRT guiding the exploration of this topic. A review of previous athlete activism begins the review of these topics, serving as context for the study.

Review of Literature

The outsized profile that athletes possess in the sport-obsessed United States has afforded them a unique platform from which to speak on societal issues. This has led to an array of scholarship about activism within the field of sport, in professional, collegiate, and amateur athletics. This study utilizes two critical theories—symbolic interactionism and critical race theory—as a framework to analyze the COU. Like so many gestures of athlete activism, the issue of race is a critical intersection.

Athlete Activism

Although athletes have long voiced concerns over religious and gender issues, armed conflicts, and facility conditions to name a few, social concerns frequently center on issues of race (Wulf, 2019). Cooper et al. (2019) suggest that diversity and complexity of race-based sport activism can be organized into examples of symbolic activism, scholarly activism, grassroots activism, sport-based activism, and economic activism. Particularly relevant to this study, “symbolic activism refers to deliberate actions exhibited by athletes designed to draw attention to social injustices and inspire positive change in political, educational, economic, and social sectors” (Cooper et al., 2019, p. 166). Protests are the most popular form of public demonstrative activist actions (PDAAs), as they are often highly visible and disruptive, such as the Smith and Carlos medal stand PDAA at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

The PDAA by Smith and Carlos, perhaps one of the most powerful and enduring displays against racial injustice in all of sport, was an outgrowth of the Olympic Project for Human Rights led by Edwards at San Jose State University (SJSU). Although the most visible, the Smith/Carlos PDAA was one of many from the mid-1960s-1970s, where athletes of color demanded dignity and respect (Edwards 2016a; Cooper et al., 2019). At SJSU in 1967, Edwards (2016b) organized a movement to

protest discriminatory policies throughout the institution, which included the eventual cancellation of a football game. In 1969, 14 Black athletes on the University of Wyoming football team (who would become known as the Black 14) were dismissed from the team after requesting to wear black armbands in a game against Brigham Young University to bring attention to the Mormon Church's prohibition against Black members joining the priesthood (Yang, 2020a). Then in 1970, a group of nine Black players at Syracuse University (who would erroneously become known as the Syracuse 8) were ostracized after sitting out spring practice in an attempt to end racial oppression within the football program (Yang, 2020b). These are but a few examples of the efforts made by college athletes that reflect the socio-political context of the era (Cooper et al., 2019), as similar PDAAs have made a resurgence since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013.

Despite athlete activism's general goal of shedding light on social injustices, the potential for pushback from entrenched power sources has been immense. Kaepernick experienced this after his silent protest of systemic White racism in America in 2016 (Reilly, 2016). Kaepernick's actions inspired support and imitators across the U.S. (BBC News, 2017), but also vociferous opposition (Breech, 2016; Travis, 2016), something also faced by any college athlete who stepped into this arena (Frederick et al., 2017). Two years later, this issue was used by President Donald Trump to inflame his supporters (Gardner, 2018). This speaks to the risks that any athlete must factor into his or her decision to make a public stand and suggests the unique success of the COU to make public commentary on a controversial issue without becoming, to pardon the pun, a political football.

Social activism in the 21st century has also been strengthened by the collaboration among athletes either on the same team or within the same sport. The success of the University of Missouri football team's PDA was partly due to the unification of the team in support of the boycott (Frederick et al., 2017). Missouri football players joined escalating student protests over what they saw as a divisive racial climate on the school's campus, making ample use of connected social media technologies to spread and amplify their message (Yan et al., 2018). Ultimately, the threat of the football team boycotting a game against Brigham Young University helped bring about significant change at the university, including the resignation of the University of Missouri president and chancellor (Yan et al., 2018). Although the case of the Missouri football team received attention from researchers such as Frederick et al. (2017) and Yan et al. (2018), both investigations focused on the case from a social media perspective. While Agyemang et al. (2010) uncovered perceptions of Black college athletes regarding race and athlete activism, they called for more scholarship on athlete activism and the experiences of Black athletes as the most important stakeholder group within college sport.

The nature of athlete activism, specifically within college athletics, is unique and often limited. Riddled with layers of rules, policies, and limitations, in conjunction with structures of power beholden to limit the voices of college athletes, symbols may serve as an outlet for them to voice their concerns about the society in which they also exist. Various backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives also

add nuance to potential college athlete activism as 49 percent of the football college athletes in NCAA Division I are Black, compared to 15 percent of head coaches and 37 percent of assistant coaches (NCAA Demographics Database, 2019), making the COU a unique and important symbol to examine.

Theoretical Framework

Study of the impactful acts of athlete activism throughout the past century can be guided through the application of critical theory, which can frame the analysis. Significant context was added to the analysis of the COU by examining the gesture through two such thrusts of critical scholarship—symbolic interactionism and critical race theory.

Symbolic Interactionism

SI is a social-psychological theory that focuses on human interaction. Humans are shown to interact with each other using symbols that maintain a shared sense of meaning among groups of people (Kloberdanz, 1988). Symbols include actions, languages, and objects such as books, pictures, and food (Morasso & Zittoun, 2014; Solomon, 1983). Such symbols are used to motivate and organize behavior (Stryker, 1980).

Blumer (1969) presented three core beliefs comprising SI. First, human beings' actions are guided by the meaning they have of such actions and objects. Using an example from the Southeastern Conference (SEC), a fan of the University of Alabama wearing a houndstooth hat in honor of former coach Paul "Bear" Bryant and his chosen headwear, would represent the first core belief. Second, the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others. That could be reflected through cries of "War Eagle" by fans of Alabama's storied rival, Auburn University. Third, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters. The University of Tennessee's "checkerboard" end zone pattern at Neyland Stadium being used in other team paraphernalia (e.g., bib overalls) would be an example of this modification and interpretation. Society is therefore comprised of individuals' joint actions, which is performing and interpreting actions in the context of relations with others (Blumer, 1969). In order to create meaning out of specific symbols, individuals require a system of interpretation or symbolic communication readily interpreted by all participants in the phenomenon (Denzin, 2016; Mead, 1934).

Snow (2001) provided an extension of Blumer's conceptualization of SI, offering four principles—interactive determination, symbolization, emergence, and human agency. Specifically, the principle of emergence focuses on the impermanence of many symbols with the belief that "new, novel, or revitalized social entities ... arise that constitute departures from, challenges to, and clarifications or transformations of everyday routines, practices, or perspectives" (Snow, 2001, p. 372). Hence, while some symbols and their interpretations and meanings become habit, others are much more reflexive. With the evolving nature of society, social entities utilize

symbolic actions that maintain a sense of meaning, often with the goal of bringing social change. Performance of symbols fluctuates based upon the cognitive and emotional states of the actors and those impacted by the performance of the symbols. An example of a symbol that does not become habit is college football fans chanting and wearing shirts supporting the firing of their school's head coach, only for such action to halt following the school's sudden winning streak. Thus, the performance of many symbolic actions is impacted by the changing thoughts and beliefs of human beings. Examples of emergent SI include protests during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (McAdam, 1983) such as Carlos and Smith's Black Power Salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games (Carlos & Zirin, 2011). Snow (2001) noted that the outcomes of these symbolic actions may simply be changes in how groups of people view themselves and are viewed by others. Therefore, the college athletes and other stakeholders analyzed in the current study utilized a novel form of symbolic behavior. In this study, we aimed to examine such behavior in relation to the change the symbol aimed to make.

Critical Race Theory

To gain a richer understanding of how symbols play a role in athlete activism, researchers should also consider the systems in which the athletes and symbols exist. College athletics is a system built on the exploitation of "amateur" athletes, where power balance skews toward White athletic administrators reaping the financial benefits associated with revenue-generating sports, whose rosters are made of predominantly Black athletes (McCormick & McCormick, 2012). Athletics, specifically high school and college athletics, is interpreted by Black males as a viable path for reaching their career aspirations, yet Black males, who make up a majority of rosters for revenue-generating sports, have lower graduation rates compared to their White counterparts (Donnor, 2005). This context is important to understand when evaluating the role of symbols in athlete activism, especially at the intercollegiate level. For example, despite the successful outcome of the University of Missouri PDAA, their efforts were criticized, condemned, and their concerns were often downplayed (Frederick et al., 2017). Many PDAA's are spurred by racial injustices, specifically. Therefore, it is appropriate to consider the context of race with symbols and athlete activism through the lens of CRT.

CRT emerged in the legal and education fields as an approach to challenging the status quo, thus allowing a broader perspective on how we consider race in the world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton, 2010). CRT proposes that "modern racism and racial inequity is systematic because it privileges and normalizes 'cultural messages and institutional policies and practices' that function to advantage whites—both directly and indirectly" (Donnor, 2005, p. 52). The CRT framework is not meant to be abstract (Taylor, 1998); instead, it should be used as a guide to understand the true nature of racism in the U.S. (DeLorme & Singer, 2010). Ultimately, CRT is a "series of critiques seeking to positively disrupt and transform racialized power relations regardless of the actors involved" (Hylton, 2010, p. 338). Through its major tenets—counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, race as a social construct, whiteness

as a property, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2016)—CRT challenges the existence of neutral race practices and promotes the value of “the Black voice” (Hylton, 2010, p. 337). Most relevant for the current study are interest convergence, counter-storytelling, and critique of liberalism. Each of these tenets has been applied in extant literature (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010; Frederick et al., 2019; Frederick et al., 2017) to explore situations surrounding previous events of athlete activism, with the goal of uncovering underlying motives, constraints, and other characteristics—such as symbols—present within these displays, much like the current case.

Interest convergence posits that decisions are made by White people (i.e., those in power), not wholly for the benefit of people of color, but out of self-interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton, 2010). Derrick Bell, the founding father of CRT (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Donnor, 2005), posited that the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision came to pass as a form of national interest for the dominant race, rather than at the interest of serving Black people in America (Bell, 1995; Dudziak, 1988). The national interest was geopolitical in nature. The U.S.’s commitment to democracy was in question due to its participation in segregation and discrimination of its own people, inextricably connecting the *Brown* decision to the Cold War (Dudziak, 2004). The integration of schools after the *Brown* (1954) decision lends itself to interest convergence, suggesting that “African Americans’ interest in achieving racial equality advanced only when it converged with European Americans’ interest, but not when it conflicted with their superior societal standing” (McCormick & McCormick, 2012, p. 41-42). Dudziak (2004) later empirically confirmed that the U.S. Justice Department intervened in *Brown* strictly because of national interests. Donnor (2005) applied interest convergence to better understand the complex educational experience of Black NCAA football players, ultimately recommending the application of CRT to improve the educational experience and outcomes for these athletes.

Counter-storytelling provides a voice to the marginalized, thus challenging the status quo narratives provided by the majority, thus casting doubt over narratives created by the majority (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; DeLorme & Singer, 2010). The Players Tribune, an online media platform committed to sharing stories from the perspective of the athlete or coach, dedicated a section of its site—Silence in not an option—to sharing personal stories of racism and marginalization. For example, National Basketball Association (NBA) Milwaukee Bucks player Sterling Brown shared his personal story of police brutality after he was tased and physically attacked by Milwaukee police officers in 2018 (Brown, 2020). In another Players Tribune article, NBA Hall of Famer Bill Russell shared a memory of counter-storytelling from 1969, when he interviewed former restaurateur-turned-Georgia Governor Lester Maddox, who only entered politics after closing his restaurant because he refused to serve Black patrons. In Russell’s view, “having him on my show exposed him for the fool he was” (Russell, 2020, para. 3). Agyemang et al. (2010) found that counter-storytelling was valuable for Black athletes in recognizing the historical feats of Black athlete activism. Additionally, Frederick et al. (2019) found a presence

of muting storytelling of Black athletes in their examination of comments posted on ESPN's Facebook page after NBA athletes spoke about racial issues at the ESPYs.

Lastly, critique of liberalism “centers on how critical race scholars are critical of and challenge the concepts of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, equal opportunity, and incremental change” (Turick et al., 2020, p. 3). In these situations, “rights are almost always cut back when they conflict with the interests of the powerful” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 29). Liberalism also comes into play when the marginalized are motivated to make a change but are beholden to those in power who look to embrace change, but at a slow and incremental pace (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004), exposing the limitations of laws and organizational policy. For example, athletes at the University of North Carolina (UNC) led an unsuccessful suit against the university and the NCAA after the academic fraud scandal involving “paper” classes hosted in the Department of African and Afro-American Studies was uncovered (Gronberg, 2017). This case highlights the limitations of both the NCAA's principle of amateurism, as well as educational policies—or at least practices—that ensure athlete eligibility rather than rigorous academic standards. In another example related to symbolism, Turick and colleagues (2020) investigated the names of athletic facilities on NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision campuses, identifying 18 venues named after individuals who participated in racist activities or held racist views. Singer et al. (2017) suggest that, based on the critique of liberalism tenet, “the notions of color blindness, meritocracy, and objectivity often obscure the unearned and unjust power, privileges, and advantages many Whites have gained and maintained throughout history” (p. 20). Since individuals such as Phog Allen (University of Kansas), Guy Mackey (Purdue University), Robert Neyland (University of Tennessee), and Adolph Ruff (University of Kentucky) have long been endeared and enshrined at their respective institutions, it may help to explain a lack of critical examination for those honored with venue names despite their questionable racist pasts (Turick et al., 2020).

CRT provided the framework necessary to guide the examination of the symbolic interactionism of the COU. Systemic restrictions created and instilled by the NCAA and its member institutions have allowed for the perpetration of athletes for financial gains while limiting athletes' economic and social power (McCormick & McCormick, 2012). For example, Donnor (2005) posited that “Black males who participate in major football programs either earning a college degree or developing a strong academic skill-set in technology, literacy, science, numeracy, history and the humanities is unlikely” (p. 60). The COU was created, in part, as a reaction to the shooting death of Keith Lamont Scott, a Black man killed by a Charlotte police officer (Yan et al., 2016). The racial focus of this symbol, in conjunction with the racial makeup of the ODU football program during the 2016 season—more than 75 percent of the team were Black while 12 of 17 members of the coaching staff were White—made the COU an interesting and nuanced case to examine symbolic interactionism while also acknowledging and observing the case from a critical race theory perspective.

The Circle of Unity Case Study

Members of the ODU football team displayed the COU gesture prior to its September 2016 game against UTSA. Inspired by actions by Kaepernick, James, and other professional athletes, ODU players sought to perform a symbolic response to the systemic oppression and racial injustice across the U.S. While members of the team wore “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) shirts on the field before warmups prior to first deploying the COU, Wilder encouraged the team to create a gesture that would express a desire for unity, leading to the creation of the COU (Minium, 2016a). As a result, the team generated national media attention with the unique nature of the symbolic COU, which Wilder suggested was less controversial than national anthem PDAs at that time (Johnson, 2016).

Coverage throughout the week following the game included a nationally televised interview on ESPN and online coverage by outlets such as USA Today (Associated Press, 2016). Wilder explained how he hoped the COU could “do something to make a difference ... instead of adding to the noise” (Minium, 2016b, para. 3). Wilder used the national pulpit to announce the creation of Children 4 Humanity, a nonprofit where ODU football players would hold outreach events with local service clubs to connect with impressionable young boys and girls, a plan developed by Wilder and team captains.

Noting that University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Charlotte) head coach Brad Lambert and his team were planning to join the COU demonstration for the next week’s game, Wilder used his national platform to challenge college football coaches across the U.S. to further empower players to find their voice. Wilder stressed that it was important for college football coaches to take seriously the concerns of their players (Minium, 2016b).

Ultimately, the gesture generated significant positive feedback from followers of the program, along with vocal criticism from a small segment of the fanbase, more than a dozen of whom called ODU Athletics to complain. The COU also coincided with the best team in the history of this incarnation of the program. (ODU did not field a football team from 1941 through 2008, when the program was restarted [ODU Athletics, 2016]). Throughout the remainder of the 2016 season, including before the Popeyes Bahamas Bowl, the gesture was repeated by the Monarchs. ODU extended an invitation to every opposing team that season to join the Monarchs for the COU; all but two opponents participated in the display immediately before kickoff during the 2016 season.

The purpose of this case study was to analyze the role of symbolism in the COU. Through analysis of media coverage and interviews, grounded by previous research of SI and CRT, four research questions were posed:

RQ1—What role do symbols play in race-based college athlete activism?

RQ2—To what degree are symbols and symbolic gestures considered a form of athlete activism?

RQ3—How are college athletes supported or constrained when attempting to make their voices heard; and

RQ4—How is symbolic activism perceived by relevant stakeholders?

Method

Research Design

The current study employed a case study research design. Case studies are a widely deployed research methodology, particularly appropriate for seeking deeper understanding of bounded phenomena (Yin, 2014). In the case of the COU, data were collected shortly after the 2016 football season, the only season where the COU was deployed. Stake (2000) suggests a case study features circumstances of special interest, allowing researchers to look for detail of interaction with its context. Well-constructed case studies are both holistic and context-sensitive, and can include many different communities—from groups, to organizations, to cultures and regions (Patton, 2002). A case study analysis is particularly appropriate for this project because the data collected comprises the best opportunity to take the reader inside the COU experience, hearing multiple perspectives to achieve a layered understanding (Patton, 2002).

Participants

This project included data analysis from two sources—media coverage of the COU throughout the 2016 season and interviews with ODU football stakeholders. In an effort to incorporate a broad array of perspectives, the majority of data analyzed for this study were in interviews with various stakeholders. Researchers conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five individuals, who each had a different perspective of the COU. Table 1 provides each stakeholder's name, the number of years they have been connected to Old Dominion football and their stakeholder role, their hometown, and their race.

Data Collection

The five study participants were interviewed independently, with each interviewee asked unique Institutional Review Board-approved, semi-structured questions tailored to their role in relation to the COU. The question list for each of the five participants in the study is listed in Appendix A. As a semi-structured interview, each question line was added to as respondents' answers merited topic-specific follow-up questions. Since each participant represented a far different stakeholder role for ODU football, their views on the Circle of Unity were likely to reflect that perspective. Therefore, the IRB-approved question lines that were created featured unique prompts, such as an opportunity for football player Rashaad Coward to reflect on his experience as a young black man in America with a platform to participate in a symbolic gesture, or the utter surprise senior athletics officials felt when they first heard about the Circle of Unity plans one hour before they were deployed.

Table 1

Participant Descriptions

Participant	Stakeholder Description	Years in Stakeholder Role	Hometown	Race
Rashaad Coward	ODU Defensive Lineman; 2016 Team Captain	2013-2016	Brooklyn, NY	Black
Larry Eakin	ODU Football Season Ticket-Holder	2009-present	Virginia Beach, VA	White
Harry Minium	<i>The Virginian-Pilot</i> , ODU Football Beat Writer	2012-2018	Norfolk, VA	White
Bruce Stewart	ODU Senior Associate Athletic Director	2007-present	Columbus, OH	Black
Bobby Wilder	ODU Head Football Coach	2009-2019	Madison, ME	White

Thematically, each of the five participants were offered an opportunity to address what the Circle of Unity meant to them as a symbol or gesture, the one similar thread which ran through each of the five interviews. This was done mindfully. CRT emphasizes examining how we consider race in the world with a broader perspective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton, 2010), so the responses to the gesture and its aftermath were predicted to highlight how each participant approached the public display from his own, internal positioning.

Interviews ranged from 12 to 41 minutes; recordings of the interviews were transcribed shortly after each interview occurred. These five participants represented key stakeholder groups who formed and shaped the COU and offered opinions about it—player, coach, administrator, fan, and journalist. The case study was bounded by the interviewees to allow in-depth analysis of the views of key constituent groups. However, the interviewees recognized how their views of the COU were impacted by the views of others in the community, stating this during their interviews. Because of the small number of study participants, and the extreme likelihood that readers would be able to figure out the source of a de-identified quote, participants consented to their names being used in the study. In an effort to establish trustworthiness through confirmability and authenticity, interview subjects were offered an opportunity to member-check their responses to the semi-structured questions to confirm that the transcripts accurately reflected their interview. None of the interview participants raised questions or concerns about the transcript of their responses.

Researcher Positionality

In an effort to reflect the diversity of interview subjects and to ensure diverse perspectives for the data analysis, the research team was composed of individuals who hold both insider and outsider research characteristics. From an organizational perspective, the research team had myriad professional experience in college athlet-

ics, coaching, journalism, public relations, and student-athlete development, which helped each researcher establish themselves as an insider researcher in his or her own unique way. From a social perspective, the research team consisted of three White males and one mixed race female, all hailing from distinctly different regions throughout North America, and varying socioeconomic backgrounds, which provided important considerations of “otherness” when analyzing the case on issues such as privilege and social power (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data Analysis

To ascertain meaning from the interviews, the researchers relied on a directed content analysis. When there is prior information known about a phenomenon, which would aid in further describing data that are gathered for a study, a directed content analysis is well-suited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The goal of a directed approach is to extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory—in this case, the COU as a form of athlete activism in the context of SI and CRT. Following the recommendation from Creswell (2006), the researchers used the chronological sequence of events to guide data analysis, beginning with the planning and emergence of the COU, followed by its initial impact, continuing evolution, and the eventual aftermath of the COU.

Following the interviews, three of the study authors predicted themes that would emerge from the data, based on their understanding of the COU, SI, and athlete activism. After a consensus forecast was produced, the researchers conducted independent, directed content analysis of the interview transcripts, independently identifying dominant content and themes (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Through prior understanding of both the COU and athlete activism, the researchers were able to link the modern-day interviews with the existing theoretical framework (Hays & Singh, 2012). This acted as a form of internal reliability for the data, as the researchers could compare what was found in the data with the consensus-expected themes. In addition to member checking, to further maximize trustworthiness through credibility and confirmability, triangulation of both investigators and theoretical perspectives were utilized in an effort to better conceptualize and explain the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, a fourth author examined the analysis upon completion through the CRT framework to further triangulate the data and the perspectives of the investigators.

Results

Through independent analysis of COU media coverage, as well as an understanding of athlete activism and SI, the researchers generated a list of expected themes to emerge from the interview data. Since the reviewers were all familiar with the Circle of Unity timeline and interview transcripts, there was little disagreement among researchers in the generation of dominant themes. They included: (a) explanation and rationale for the decision to make the gesture; (b) an explanation of the decision-making around the specific symbol; (c) the impression of the COU from multiple perspectives; (d) support for the gesture, as well as some pushback from the

“stick to sports” crowd; (e) feedback about its galvanizing effect on the team and its fans; and (f) fear that the gesture, however meaningful, would fade in impact if not continued in subsequent seasons.

Next, three authors independently coded the interview transcripts of Wilder, Coward, Stewart, Minium, and Eakin, assembling findings which lined up under the predicted themes, as well as any unexpected findings. Four themes emerged from the data. Many were predicted by the advance themes generated through directed content analysis. Some, however, were not. The following four sections explain each of the consensus themes found in the data, amplified by attributed quotes from the five interviews.

Surprise

According to Wilder and Coward, the defensive lineman and team captain, discussion of national events was common in the ODU team locker room. However, plans for the COU were formulated by Wilder and his captains, and then revealed to athletic administration only one hour prior to kickoff with UTSA. “Blindsided would probably be a word that would be associated with this, because it came up so quickly,” said Stewart, the University’s senior associate athletic director. “I think the fans didn’t know what was going on. They were like, ‘Okay, that’s cool,’ and they went back to their beer or whatever,” said Minium, the *Virginian-Pilot* beat reporter, who also was unaware of the COU beforehand. Eakin, the season ticket holder, confirmed this: “I’m not sure I had a clue what was going on that first time,” he said. “(Coach Wilder) had been very positive early on (with the program), having the players go down to the student end, thanking them for coming. I thought about it in that context.” The element of surprise was not planned. Wilder said the gesture was arrived at following negotiations between the coach and his captains, who had expressed an interest in making a public gesture or statement to bring awareness to racial injustice across the U.S. This need to “negotiate” the PDAA indicated a level of both interest convergence and critique of liberalism, central tenets of CRT.

Do “Something”

In the run-up to the game in which the demonstration was unveiled, there had been emotional discussions between players and coaches. Issues such as police-involved shootings and a polarizing presidential election season convinced the players they had to do “something” to express their feelings. “It was not just what happened in Charlotte, in Tulsa, in Dallas, or Colin Kaepernick taking a knee. It was a culmination of everything going on in our world,” Wilder said. The coach stressed that he did not want an action that would “add to the noise” of a turbulent time. In other words, Wilder wanted to avoid any action that might have been viewed as controversial, while still allowing athletes to engage in activism and express their concerns. The idea for the COU crystallized when a fellow co-captain recalled episodes from his own upbringing, Coward said. “Zach Pascal came up with the idea of—when him and his sister were fighting when they were younger, his parents made them hold hands. You can’t be mad at somebody when you’re holding hands with them.”

The desire to respond to the ongoing social issues did not just come from inside the team, but also externally. Coward noted that NFL players reached out to Wilder via social media asking for him and the team to “do something” to help bring the Charlotte community back together following the September 2016 police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, which led to protests and unrest (Domonoske, 2016). The desire for public demonstration aligns with the CRT tenet counter-storytelling, as Black athletes both within and outside the ODU program sought to express their feelings on a public stage.

Going “Public”

For participants and observers, the discussion in the days following the first COU display was pivotal. Plans were made to continue the following week, this time inviting that week’s opponent, University of North Carolina-Charlotte 49ers, to participate. Wilder did numerous local media interviews, as well as a nationally televised interview on ESPN. The team captains who first approached Wilder with their concerns sat down with the *Pilot’s* Minium and told their personal stories (Minium, 2016c). The reporter said it was a significant education for him, one which contradicted dominant media narratives about violent citizen-police interactions. “I asked them all about their interactions with police. Some were bad, some were good, but their perception of life is so much different than people who grew up in the suburbs,” Minium said. As media coverage accelerated, Wilder stressed the name of the gesture repeatedly—the Circle of Unity. “We could have called it the Circle of Hope, the Circle of Happiness. We could have called it the Circle of Team. We chose ‘unity’ because the entire goal of what our symbol was to unify our country and unify our world.” Wilder said that was a key component of getting the public to accept what was in essence a statement about how society faces tough issues.

Because it was a public statement, in an arena where other public statements quickly became divisive, the COU required a deftness of execution. Therefore, a consistent vein of public relations considerations ran through the comments of both the participants and observers, something that was not anticipated by researchers in their directed content analysis. Notably, Wilder used the exact same phraseology to describe the motivation for the COU in interviews with the *Pilot*, ESPN, and for this study. There was a prediction of backlash from some fans of the program. Wilder stressed to his players that they were not to argue with those who criticized them in public, or on social media. The coach also telephoned every fan who contacted the University’s athletic fundraising division with complaints about the COU. “I stressed that everyone that attacked, we were not going to attack them back. We were going to invite them into the Circle,” Wilder said, thus epitomizing the essence of the COU while also mitigating any concerns associated with the act. From a public relations standpoint, Wilder’s approach appeared effective. Eakin, who witnessed the first COU gesture, was supportive of the cause. He was also appreciative that it was done subtly. “I never heard a negative statement, and believe me, I hear plenty of negative statements about him coaching ... it’s not like I live in a choir of angels. But nope, never heard anyone say a thing except positive stuff about it,” he said.

The Evolution of a Symbol

The largely positive response was exceeded by the internal positivity created by the gesture, according to the data. A win streak followed the first COU display; in fact, ODU won nine of its last 10 games of the 2016 season. Coward, the defensive lineman, said the COU helped form a team-wide bond. “When I first got here, cliques, there was a whole bunch of cliques on the team ... after that situation, we were like a team,” he said. Wilder credited the COU for giving the team a higher purpose that season. “If you go back and look at different teams, you ask: ‘What changed? What brought this microcosm of society all together?’ I believe it was the Circle of Unity—and the improved play by quarterback David Washington—that was the defining moment for us,” he said. “It was a very powerful symbol, and I’m surprised more teams didn’t emulate it,” said Minium, the journalist.

The interviews for this case study were done a few months after the 2016 season ended, but before preseason fall practice for the following season. It was unclear whether the COU would continue the following season. Observers doubted whether the energy generated from the 2016 season could continue but hoped for some residual benefit to result from the 2016 season. “I really have my doubts (it would continue). I’ve seen a lot of ideas come and go and they don’t seem to sustain over periods of time,” Eakin said. Minium recommended continuing the gesture, if only because of how it changed the chemistry in a locker room he was in every day during football season as a beat reporter. “If it doesn’t continue next year, I think the lasting impression will be limited ... it was, I hate to use this word because I’m a journalist and all that, it was a very special team to cover,” he said.

Internal stakeholders suggested the potential for the COU to have lasting goodwill, even if it was a one-season gesture. Senior Associate AD Stewart said a department-wide growth in social consciousness existed that fall among the University’s student-athletes, “Because it became bigger than just football. I think they had some influence over some of our other sports programs, and you saw a spike in community service endeavors that were being done throughout our department.” Coward said the positive nature of the demonstration meant that it was something other athletes wanted to mirror in their own actions. “The week that we played Charlotte, NFL guys started hitting up Coach Wilder on Twitter, and were telling us they wanted to do something to bring his community back together ... And by us doing that with the Charlotte team, it brought our community together, and brought positivity in a dark time.” This fact perhaps best defines the moment-in-time nature of the COU. External stakeholders also agreed with the general impact and message of the symbol: “You know, it’s pretty hard to be against unity,” Eakin said.

Only lasting a season, the COU can be viewed as both having a powerful impact during its one season while also perhaps failing to have a long-term impact. The lasting effect that could have resulted will never be known; however, the data exhibit the impact it had on numerous stakeholders both inside and outside the ODU program. Such impact on the ODU football players and others within the ODU community will never be able to be truly understood. Thus, while only sustained for a season, the impact of the COU should not be discounted.

Discussion

For a few months of the 2016 season, players and coaches of the ODU football team made a public statement expressing their dismay with social issues in America. High-profile athletes including Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James have generated much national attention for their social activism, receiving both praise and scorn for their symbolic actions. Motivated by many of the same conflicted emotions about the modern-day United States, ODU's Circle of Unity gesture was met with muted approval within the local football community and endured little of the backlash that other, contemporary athletic activists received. It also, however, was constrained by actions within the university's embedded power structure. The current study examined the COU through the two theoretical lenses of symbolic interactionism and critical race theory. The power of symbols and the embedded, racialized power dynamics within collegiate athletics allowed for a robust examination of the COU, allowing its meaning and impact to be framed along the spectrum of athlete activism, suggesting lessons that can be learned from the exercise for student-athletes, coaches, and administrators.

Addressing RQ1, examining what role symbols play in college athlete activism, we discovered the creation, execution, and impact of the COU reflected the tenets of SI in a few ways. The symbol itself was developed with the goal of creating unity among all stakeholders involved with the ODU football team including players, coaches, and fans (Snow, 2001). The COU was also shown to draw upon the inclusive nature of circles, and guide people's actions as a result (Denzin, 2016; Mead, 1934). The action of standing in a circle and holding hands as a symbol showed a sense of unity across the team and was interpreted as such (Blumer, 1969; Cooper et al., 2019). The symbol itself was created not only as a form of expression, but with the intention to create a positive behavioral change (Snow, 2001; Stryker, 1980), instead of other potential symbols that could have been viewed negatively by some. Compared to the PDAA's of the 1960's and 70's (Cooper et al., 2019), the COU aimed to reflect the socio-political context of the present.

From the perspective of CRT, the symbol (holding hands in a circle during warmups) could be perceived as muted and carefully crafted to ensure all stakeholders were appeased (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). The symbol represents an example of counter-storytelling, where the athletes are attempting to provide a voice for themselves and those who are marginalized but are restricted in how this is done (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). The perception and response to the symbol by external stakeholders such as the season ticket holder Eakin, highlighted the neutrality of the symbol, in comparison to the BLM t-shirts, which further emphasized a critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). The COU as a symbol was acceptable, but BLM shirts would have been a step too far, as Wilder and Eakin alluded to. The symbolic "choice" of the COU over BLM shirts (or even kneeling during the national anthem) represents only incremental change, which could itself be interpreted as the perpetuation of systemic racism within college sport. Therefore, this PDAA highlighted the

need to examine examples of athlete activism through a CRT lens (Agyemang et al., 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; DeLorme & Singer, 2010; Frederick et al., 2019; Frederick et al., 2017; Hylton, 2010).

In addressing RQ2, the degree to which the symbols and symbolic gestures could be considered a form of athlete activism, the college athletes in this study simply desired to respond to the ongoing social tensions in a positive way, shifting the way they view themselves and the way fans viewed them, exhibiting their ability to challenge perspectives and bring social change (Snow, 2001). There was very little direct discussion of the COU as a PDAA itself. With Wilder telling his players that it was their responsibility to own any negative feedback received from the gesture, both players and coaches helped foster the national exposure and positive feedback, ensuring the symbol was interpreted accurately (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 2016; Mead, 1934). But Wilder's action also exemplified tenets of CRT, where the players were limited in their expression, where the symbol required approval of the coach. While the initial intention of the symbol was in response to the killing of an unarmed Black male, the coach guided players to respond as a unit, encouraging them not to "add to the noise." Thus, the coach's actions speak to the critique of liberalism, both in neutralizing the player's actions and embracing change but slowly (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

Additionally, the creation of the non-profit, Children 4 Humanity, in response to the COU, could be considered a form of athlete activism (Cooper et al., 2019). This grassroots activism was a micro-level example of community engagement and mentoring in which the team did more than "add to the noise." But while the intentions of the COU was to shed light on the killing of the unarmed Black man, among other racially charged issues occurring in the U.S., the team created a nonprofit organization that did not connect directly with the initial motivation to create the COU. This highlights another example of a critique of liberalism, where the marginalized are motivated to make a change, but at a slow and manageable pace (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

While not an explicit goal of the ODU players, a positive, unexpected outcome of the COU was the increase in college athlete community engagement. The football team's goal to bring attention to social injustices spurred a sense of community and giving back among their peers, thus motivating others to action (Cooper et al., 2019; Snow, 2001; Stryker, 1980). Further, while many PDAA's desire to serve as a disruption and challenge structures and systems, the COU was employed due to the players' desire to simply do something to express their feelings. Thus, there was no stated desire to achieve systemic change or serve as a disruption to any system as the focus was on the ability for the circle to unite members of the team and community.

Concerning the final two research questions investigating the support/constraints faced by the athletes and the response by stakeholders to the COU, activist displays manifest differently at the collegiate level due to the embedded power structures which exist; athletes are beholden to the institution for their financial wellbeing. Consequences and backlash typically occur in response to athlete activism at all levels but may be harsher at the intercollegiate level. For example, the University

of Missouri athletes were supported by head coach Gary Pinkel in their demonstration, while Grambling State University athletes' boycott came without support from coaches or administration. The context of each protest is significant—where Missouri athletes joined an ongoing university-wide protest addressing racial injustices—while Grambling State athletes were protesting due to the poor conditions of facilities and athletic support. Thus, it was crucial that the symbol create a shared sense of meaning across groups (Kloberdanz, 1988). ODU players' demonstration aligned closely with Missouri's in that they received support from Wilder, who met with team captains to determine a symbolic response that would create a shared sense of meaning (Kloberdanz, 1988), but was also appropriate for the setting (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Further, as the season progressed, and the team performed well, the symbol was seen as a galvanizing tool for players which may have helped them shift their self-perception (Snow, 2001). Thus, seemingly, the players' actions were encouraged.

These actions also came at the expense of other potential actions. For example, while administration was unaware of the symbolic action prior to its first display, Wilder's decision to encourage players to perform the COU as opposed to wearing the BLM shirts or engage in other acts suggests that the views of administration and other stakeholders were considered, and potentially overrode the views of the players, highlighting interest convergence (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; DeLorme & Singer, 2010). Season ticket holder Eakin's suggestion that the response may have been different had the players worn BLM t-shirts while forming the COU acknowledged that the symbol would have been interpreted differently, and thus supported the COU, which asks—what is significantly different about a BLM shirt and the COU? That sentiment, along with Wilder's steering of the COU, highlights the importance of applying the CRT framework to this study, as it exemplifies the systemic racial inequality layered into something as innocuous as a Circle of Unity symbol (Donnor, 2005). While the reaction to players' wearing BLM shirts while performing the COU will never be known given the polarized nature of race-based discourse in the U.S., it likely prevented negative response from entrenched, White power structures (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton, 2010). Additionally, Wilder also represented the team as a spokesperson of sorts, supporting the team through promotion of the symbol and open communication with the media, fans, and other stakeholders; another example of how power structures may be utilized to manage the narrative (Hylton, 2010). Thus, the symbol can and should be viewed with a critical lens as players sought to express themselves in reaction to the social and racial injustices occurring in the U.S., and those in power sought to support them but in a more muted capacity (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton, 2010).

The act produced mostly positive responses, which helped athletes solicit support from various stakeholders and unify the team (Stryker, 1980). The team's improved performance, ultimately leading to the program's most successful season in history, was partly attributed to the impact of the COU, exhibiting the positive impact of symbols (Snow, 2001). Furthermore, the athletic program's community service

efforts also appeared to increase, yielding a positive social impact from the COU (Cooper et al., 2019; Stryker, 1980). Another positive response came in the form of national publicity, which allowed the team to further expand the reach and impact of the symbol (Denzin, 2016; Mead, 1934). Wilder's national interviews, including on ESPN's SportsCenter, provided positive publicity for the team, university, as well as the movement surrounding positive social change. The communication of the action throughout the country led to NFL players reaching out to express their desire to perform the COU, further promoting the movement toward positive change (Cooper et al., 2019; Stryker, 1980).

This represents a significant finding of the study—the importance of public relations in any effort to use an athletic arena for activist goals. An observer might suggest Wilder threaded the needle by supporting his players in their desire to make a statement about an issue that is important to them, while maintaining agency over his players as to not offend entrenched power structures with a confrontational view of race-based activism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Minium's interview with the captains of the team also shed light on the various perspectives and opinions of these college athletes. "...Their perception of life is so much different than people who grew up in the suburbs," as Minium stated in reference to his interview with the athletes, further emphasizes the difference between what is seen and what is understood across stakeholders (Snow, 2001), while also speaking to the importance of examining the current case from a CRT perspective toward understanding the true nature of racism in the U.S. (DeLorme & Singer, 2010; Donner, 2005). For example, critical race theorists could interpret Minium's statement as one grounded in racism—the discussion of life of "people who grew up in the suburbs" to that of Black college athletes whom are presumed to have grown up in the inner cities or in other circumstances. This comment, while minor in the context of the data, speaks volumes about the perspective of the stakeholders involved.

This also speaks to the nature of the status quo within the intercollegiate athletics system, where athletes who wish to support a specific cause, are limited in their capacity by the powers-that-be (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hylton, 2010). Is there opportunity for athletes to don symbols that truly reflect who they are and what they represent, such as the BLM t-shirts? Or, will administration dilute their voices and symbols into something more palpable for mass audiences? This speaks to the importance of coaching and educating; to avoid stymieing activist hearts, but rather guide them, while also considering their own position within the conversation.

Conclusion

The actions of both the players and Wilder align with both SI and CRT. The Circle of Unity was encouraged by Wilder due to the circle being a unifying symbol that would not offend any relevant stakeholders. This suggests the "type" of symbol utilized in activism matters immensely. In contrast, the BLM t-shirts, while at their core exhibiting a positive message, had become divisive due to social interaction and

the meaning that White individuals began to assign them, which like many symbols, had evolved over time (Blumer, 1969; Snow, 2001). Wilder's actions also exhibit interest convergence, as he was attempting to satisfy two groups with differing power dynamics—predominantly White individuals in positions of power, and athletes of color who lack power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). His representation of ODU players' desires, who themselves had little ability to publicly speak out about their interests and concerns, also provides basis for the use of CRT's counter-storytelling, to attempt to provide a voice for those without such voice (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Therefore, the symbol of expression used by ODU's players demonstrates how symbolic actions can be encouraged and provide meaning, albeit in a way that agrees with and benefits individuals in positions of power.

While comparison of athlete PDAAs was not a goal of this study, the unique nature of the COU presents potential explanation for the success and ongoing positive impact achieved as a result. The name "Circle of Unity" act of players and coaches holding hands (including, at times, members of opposing teams) maintained positive, unifying meaning. Instead of performing an action that could have been deemed divisive by relevant stakeholders, the COU was mostly supported by media and fans. Further, awareness through both traditional and social communication channels enhanced the positive impact it achieved. In a time of political discord throughout the nation—which can especially be seen on social media—the COU presents the impact that a simple gesture can have for a team, fan base, and community. While the COU was certainly a demonstration of college athletes taking an activist position, curiously, there was almost no mention of athlete activism among the words of the case study interview subjects. This is perhaps because of the approach taken by the team. While feelings of angst and frustration underpinned the creation of the gesture, and while other concurrent demonstrations were seen as more confrontational (Cooper et al., 2019), the COU ultimately was a demonstration of togetherness.

The current study explored college athlete activism through the lenses of SI and CRT. Heeding the call from Agyemang et al. (2010) to dig deeper into a case of athlete activism, this study focused on ODU's COU as a PDA that utilizes the power of a symbol to bring awareness and structural change (Cooper et al., 2019). The study sought to examine the gesture itself—the public, arms-linked-and-raised display performed before ODU football games throughout the 2016 season—as athlete activism that utilizes the power of a symbol. The study also surveyed the embedded racial dynamics surrounding the issue, attempting to ascertain the role race played in the creation and the impact of the symbol. By critically examining the COU through stakeholder interviews, the study sought to assess the power of a symbol in activist actions in the athletic sphere.

A directed content analysis predicted many of the themes that would emerge from the interview transcripts. Outcomes resulting from the COU included enhanced connection within the ODU team, national attention, and the creation of a nonprofit organization. However, the nonprofit, Children 4 Humanity, operated in a diminished capacity in 2017, then was also discontinued. Wilder, meanwhile, resigned in December 2019 following three straight losing seasons (Kercheval, 2019). Further,

news emerged in mid-2020, as the U.S. elevated racial tensions with the killing of George Floyd, among other unarmed Black men and women, that Coach Wilder commandeered the player's movement (Winkler, 2020). Therefore, while short-term results included positive outcomes to the team and community, the COU seemingly failed to achieve any significant long-term impact to the program, community, or systems and structures.

The support and constraints surrounding one group of college athletes' desire to express their feelings about the systemic oppression and racial injustice in the U.S. was evident through the actions of the 2016 Old Dominion University football team in creating the Circle of Unity. The use of a circle and its positive response stood in contrast to other symbols utilized by both college and professional athletes that were deemed controversial. As athletes at all levels continue to face challenges amidst the social issues within the U.S., the current case provides credence for the role of the symbol in activist displays and also brings attention to both the supporting and constraining forces at play in athlete activists' desires to achieve their goals.

References

- Agyemang, K., Singer, J. N., & DeLorme, J. (2010). An exploratory study of black male college athletes' perceptions on race and athlete activism. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 45, 419-435.
- Associated Press (2016, September 30). Old Dominion, Charlotte to form "Circle of Unity" Saturday. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/2016/09/30/old-dominion-charlotte-to-form-circle-of-unity-saturday/91355018/>
- BBC News* (2017, August 24). Colin Kaepernick supporters rally for unemployed NFL player. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41034851>
- Bell, D. (1995). Serving two masters: integration ideals and client interests in school desegregation litigation. In R. Delgado (Ed.), *Critical race theory: The cutting edge* (pp. 228-238). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Breech, J. (2016, August 30). WATCH: 49ers fan burns Kaepernick jersey while playing national anthem. *CBSSports*. <http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/watch-49ers-fan-burns-kaepernick-jersey-while-playing-national-anthem/>
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483. (1954).
- Brown, S. (2020, July 2). Your money can't silence me. *The Players Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://www.theplayertribune.com/en-us/articles/sterling-brown-milwaukee-police-racial-injustice>
- Carlos, J., & Zirin, D. (2011). *The John Carlos story: The sports moment that changed the world*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Cooper, J. N., Macaulay, C., & Rodriguez, S. H. (2019). Race and resistance: A typology of African American sport activism. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 54, 151-181.

- Creswell, J.W. (2006). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeCuir, J. T., & Dixson, A. D. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 26-31.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: NYU Press.
- DeLorme, J., & Singer, J. N. (2010). The interest convergence principle and the integration of Major League Baseball. *Journal of Black Studies*, 41(2), 367-384.
- Denzin, N. K. (2016). Symbolic interactionism. In K. B. Jensen & R. T. Craig (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of communication theory and philosophy* (pp. 1989-1999). Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
- Domonoske, C. (2016, September 21). After fatal police shooting, protest erupts in Charlotte, N.C. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thewo-way/2016/09/21/494844130/after-police-shooting-protesters-in-charlotte-n-c-shut-down-interstate>
- Donnor, J. K. (2005). Towards an interest-convergence in the education of African-American football student athletes in major college sports. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 45-67.
- Dowd, K. (2016, November 9). After years of silence, Steph Curry is finally getting political. *San Francisco Chronicle*. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/elections/article/After-years-of-silence-Steph-Curry-gets-political-10604186.php?psid=7h-kZN>
- Dudziak, M. L. (1988). Desegregation as a Cold War imperative. *Stanford Law Review*, 41(61), 1-61.
- Dudziak, M. L. (2004). Brown as a Cold War case. *The Journal of American History*, 91(1), 32-42.
- Dwyer, C. (2019, October 29). NCAA plans to allow college athletes to get paid for the use of their names, images. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/29/774439078/ncaa-starts-process-to-allow-compensation-for-college-athletes>
- Edwards, H. (2016a, November). *The fourth wave: Black athlete protests in the second decade of the 21st century*. Keynote address at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Conference, Tampa Bay, FL.
- Edwards, H. (2016b). The promise and limits of leveraging Black athlete power potential to compel campus change. *Journal of Higher Education Athletics & Innovation*, 1(1), 4-13.
- Frederick, E. L., Pegoraro, A., & Sanderson, J. (2019). Divided and united: Perceptions of athlete activism at the ESPYs. *Sport in Society*, 22(12), 1919-1936.
- Frederick, E., Sanderson, J., & Schlereth, N. (2017). Kick these kids off the team and take away their scholarships: Facebook and perceptions of athlete activism at the University of Missouri. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 10, 17-34.

- Gardner, S. (2018, July 5). Trump says NFL's new anthem policy 'worse than not standing'. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2018/07/05/trump-nfl-players-locker-room-anthem-worse-than-not-standing/761900002/>
- Gronberg, R. (2017, April 18). State appeals court says former UNC athletes can't pursue paper-classes lawsuit. *The Raleigh News & Observer*. Retrieved from <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article145267479.html>
- Hays, D.G., & Singh, A.A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Hsieh, H., & Shannon, S. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*, 1277-1288.
- Hylton, K. (2010). How a turn to critical race theory can contribute to our understanding of 'race', racism and anti-racism in sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 45*, 335-354.
- James, X., & Lombardo, K. (2016, January 6). A history of LeBron James's activism. *Sports Illustrated*. <https://www.si.com/nba/lebron-james-cleveland-cavaliers-social-political-activism>
- Johnson, D. (2016, September 25). ODU responds to turmoil with 'circle of unity'. *Daily Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailypress.com/sports/college/old-dominion/dp-odu-responds-to-turmoil-with-circle-of-unity-20160924-story.html>
- Kercheval, B. (2019, December 2). Old Dominion coach Bobby Wilder resigns from position with program. *CBS Sports*. <https://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/old-dominion-coach-bobby-wilder-resigns-from-position-with-program/>
- Khan, A. I. (2012). *Curt Flood in the media: Baseball, race, and the demise of the activist-athlete*. Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press.
- Kloberdanz, T. J. (1988). Symbols of German-Russian ethnic identity on the Northern Plains. *Great Plains Quarterly, 8*, 3-15.
- Marston, S. (2017). The revival of athlete activism(s): Divergent Black politics in the 2016 Presidential Election engagements of LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick. *FairPlay, Revista de Filosofía, Ética y Derecho del Deporte, (10)*, 45-68.
- McAdam, D. (1983). Tactical innovation and the pace of insurgency. *American Sociological Review, 48*, 735-754.
- McCormick, A. C., & McCormick, R. A. (2012). Race and interest convergence in NCAA sports. *Wake Forest Journal of Law and Policy, 2*, 17-43.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Minium, H. (2016a, September 25). ODU football players join hands to address shootings in Charlotte, Tulsa. *The Virginian-Pilot*. Retrieved from https://pilotonline.com/sports/college/old-dominion/football/odu-football-players-join-hands-to-address-shootings-in-charlotte/article_3695ffbd-bf39-5017-b948-f1634ee4e36c.html
- Minium, H. (2016b, September 29). Charlotte 49ers will join ODU in "circle of unity" before Saturday's game. *The Virginian-Pilot*. Retrieved from https://pilotonline.com/sports/college/old-dominion/football/article_d26f3de7-0cc9-56d2-9228-ea5257a421ad.html

- Minium, H. (2016c, October 5). A Q&A with ODU football players about Black Lives Matter, police shootings and how they're trying to do something positive. *The Virginian-Pilot*. Retrieved from https://www.pilotonline.com/sports/college/old-dominion/article_c123a1f4-1f72-5b25-b855-663a6649e826.html
- Morasso, S. G., & Zittoun, T. (2014). The trajectory of food as a symbolic resource for international migrants. *Outlines – Critical Practice Studies*, 15, 28-48.
- NCAA Demographics Database. (2019). Coach and student-athlete demographics by sport and title. Retrieved from <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/ncaa-demographics-database>
- ODU Athletics. (2016, May 11). *ODU athletics history timeline*. Retrieved from http://www.odusports.com/ViewArticle.dbml?DB_OEM_ID=31100&AT-CLID=210946687
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Potter, W. J., & Levine-Donnerstein, D. (1999). Rethinking validity and reliability in content analysis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 27, 258-284.
- Reilly, K. (2016, August 27). Colin Kaepernick protests national anthem over treatment of minorities: 'There are bodies in the street.' *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/4469350/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest/>
- Russell, B. (2020, September 14). Racism is not a historical footnote. *The Players Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://www.theplayertribune.com/en-us/articles/bill-russell-nba-racial-injustice>
- Schmidt, H. C. (2018). Sport reporting in an era of activism: Examining the intersection of sport media and social activism. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 11(1), 2-17.
- Schroeder, G. (2013, October 21). Grambling players provide shocking details, reason they ended boycott. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/swac/2013/10/21/grambling-players-provide-shocking-details-former-coach-swayed-them-back-out-of-protest/3144353/>
- Shear, M. D. (2018, June 5). Trump abruptly calls off Philadelphia Eagles' visit to White House. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/sports/philadelphia-eagles-white-house.html>
- Singer, J.N., Weems, A.J., & Garner, J.R. (2017). Fraternal twins: Critical race theory and systemic racism theory as analytic and activist tools for college sport reform. In B.J. Hawkins, A.R. Carter-Francique, & J.N. Cooper (Eds.), *Critical race theory: Black athletic sport experiences in the United States* (pp. 11-56). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Snow, D. A. (2001). Extending and broadening Blumer's conceptualization of Symbolic Interactionism. *Symbolic Interaction*, 24, 367-377.
- Solomon, M. R. (1983). The role of products as social stimuli: A symbolic interactionism perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10, 319-329.

- Stake, R. E. (2000). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 435-454). Thousand Oaks, C A: Sage Publications.
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings.
- Taylor, E. (1998). A primer on critical race theory. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 19, 122-124.
- Travis, C. (2016, August 29). Colin Kaepernick is an idiot. *Outkick the Coverage*. Retrieved from <http://www.outkickthecoverage.com/colin-kaepernick-is-an-idiot-082716>
- Turick, R., Weems, A., Swim, N., Bopp, T., & Singer, J.N. (2020). Who are we honoring? Extending the ebony & ivy discussion to include sport facilities. *Journal of Sport Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2019-0303>.
- Wiggins, D. K. (2014). ‘The Struggle That Must Be’: Harry Edwards, Sport and the Fight for Racial Equality. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31(7), 760-777.
- Winkler, A. (2020, June 3). Players say former coach ‘hijacked’ ODU football’s Black Lives Matter movement. *WTKR*. Retrieved from <https://www.wtkr.com/sports/sources-former-coach-hijacked-odu-footballs-black-lives-matter-movement>.
- Wulf, S. (2019, January 30). Athletes and activism: The long, defiant history of sports protests. *The Undeclared*. Retrieved from <https://theundefeated.com/features/athletes-and-activism-the-long-defiant-history-of-sports-protests/>
- Yan, G., Pegoraro, A., & Watanabe, N. M. (2018). Student-athletes’ organization of activism at the University of Missouri: Resource mobilization on Twitter. *Journal of Sport Management*, 32, 24-37.
- Yan, H., Zenteno, R. & Todd, B. (2016, November 30). Keith Scott killing: No charges against officer. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/30/us/keith-lamont-scott-case-brentley-vinson/index.html>
- Yang, A. (2020a, February 13). Black history month: Wyoming’s Black 14 showed the power of principle. *Sports Illustrated*. Retrieved from <https://www.si.com/college/2020/02/13/black-history-month-wyoming-black-14>
- Yang, A. (2020b, February 22). Black history month: The Syracuse 8 risked their careers to take a stand for equality. *Sports Illustrated*. Retrieved from <https://www.si.com/college/2020/02/22/black-history-month-syracuse-8>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Appendix A. A List of Interview Questions Asked

To Bobby Wilder

1. Take us back to the week of September 24 last fall. What was your reaction when players came to you wanting to express their strong feelings about the recent police-related violence in Charlotte?
2. How did that discussion with your football team's leaders morph into the Circle of Unity display?
3. How aware were you of differing viewpoints about this highly-charged issue within members of the football program?
4. How aware were you of differing viewpoints about this highly-charged issue within the Monarch fan community?
5. How was the decision made to allow the students to make their public demonstration, but then create what is now known as the Circle of Unity?
6. While the first demonstration of the Circle of Unity was being undertaken, what was your belief about fans' perception of the gesture?
7. After the game was over and you explained the actions through the media, what was the fans' reaction to the gesture?
8. Why did you want to continue the Circle of Unity gesture throughout the season?
9. What do you think is the lasting impression of the Circle of Unity?

To Bruce Stewart

1. When were you informed of the plans for the two political demonstrations before the Texas-San Antonio game, the players' wearing "Black Lives Matter" shirts, and the Circle of Unity?
2. What was your reaction when you heard this information?
3. What instructions, if any, did you convey to Coach Wilder or other members of the football program?
4. As an athletic leader of the University, what type of reaction did you receive after the first game where the Circle of Unity was displayed?
5. What was the most negative piece of feedback you received?
6. What was the most positive piece of feedback you received?
7. The Circle of Unity continued through the season. What direction did you give the football program about the gesture for the rest of the season?
8. What meaning do you think observers attached to this gesture?
9. What do you think is the lasting impression of the Circle of Unity?

To Rashaad Coward

1. The week of the Texas-San Antonio Game, I have been informed that you were one of the football team leaders who approached Coach Wilder. What did you tell him?
2. What was Coach Wilder's reaction?
3. Before that game, you and other players wore "Black Lives Matter" shirts during warmups. Why did you do that?
4. Then you participated in the Circle of Unity gesture. Why did you do that?
5. What feedback did you receive from inside the football program about the demonstrations?
6. What feedback did you receive from outside the football program about the demonstrations?
7. What is your opinion of the Circle of Unity gestures continuing throughout the season, and expanding to include the other team when they wanted to participate?
8. What effect did participation in the process have on you individually?
9. What do you think is the lasting impression of the Circle of Unity?

To Harry Minium

1. When did you find out about plans for gestures by members of the ODU football team before the Texas-San Antonio game?
2. What did you see on the field during warmups?
3. What was the reaction of fans in the stadium during the displays?
4. What reaction did you receive from *Virginian-Pilot* readers after you wrote about the "Black Lives Matter" and Circle of Unity displays?
5. In what way, if any, did the reaction from readers change as the displays continued throughout the season?
6. What were your interactions like with Bobby Wilder when you discussed this issue?
7. What do you think is the lasting impression of the Circle of Unity?

To Larry Eakin

1. Take us back to September 24, 2016. You were in the stadium before the Texas-San Antonio game. What did you see?
2. What was the reaction of fans in the stadium to the display?
3. What was your reaction when you read about the display, and its designation as the Circle of Unity, in media reports published after the game?
4. When you discussed the Circle of Unity with other ODU fans, what did you say?
5. What do you think of the Circle of Unity?
6. To what degree do you feel that sentiment is commonplace among fans of ODU football?
7. What do you think is the lasting impression of the Circle of Unity?