

“The Best Recovery You Could Possibly Get”: Sleep, Rest, and the National Basketball Association

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This article contextualizes recent concerns about rest in the National Basketball Association by considering the concurrent rise of a promotional sleep culture. This work builds upon Grant Farred’s analysis of the event of the Black athletic body at rest. Drawing on research from the cultural studies of sport and the critical sleep literature, the author complicates the idea that rest, broadly conceived of as sleep, is a straightforward route to resistance or refusal. Instead of dislodging underlying racial logics or capitalist expectations, the promotion of sleep among National Basketball Association players makes their recovery habits subject to greater surveillance and commodification. Such developments have obvious consequences for athletes and sport systems. What is less apparent is how these social forces also shape collective understandings of sleep difficulties and how to solve them.

In March 2017, Adam Silver, the Commissioner of the National Basketball Association (NBA), declared that the practice of strategically benching tired but otherwise healthy star players had become “an extremely significant” issue facing the league (Bontemps, 2017). Concerns about a growing reliance on the Did Not Play-Rest injury listing flared up after several high-profile teams, including the Golden State Warriors and Cleveland Cavaliers, decided to sit multiple star athletes on back-to-back weekends during nationally televised games. The NBA found itself in an unenviable position. It needed to reconcile the priorities of corporate sponsors and television audiences, while managing the welfare of a predominantly African American workforce, at a moment when an emerging body of scientific data was demonstrating that sleep improves athletic performance, reduces injuries, and potentially prolongs careers (see Fullagar et al., 2015; Halson, 2013; Mah, Mah, Kezirian, & Dement, 2011; Samuels, 2008, 2012).

It is no secret that NBA players are subject to intense travel and performance demands. Teams play 82 regular-season games (including 41 away games) in a 6-month time frame. On average, most NBA teams play three times a week for 26 weeks, and franchises log about 40,000 travel miles in a season (McMahan, 2018). The popularity and profitability of the league mean that athlete workloads are not likely to diminish. By some accounts, we are in a “new golden age” of basketball (Bryant, 2017). In 2016, the NBA signed an 8-year, \$24 billion television contract with TNT and ESPN. There are lucrative licensing and merchandising agreements in place with major American corporations, including Nike, State Farm Insurance, and Anheuser-Busch. The typical team is valued at \$1.9 billion, and wealth-sharing agreements mean that even those teams that are less valuable or located in smaller markets still benefit from the expanding of the league (Badenhausen & Ozanian, 2019). In 2019, the median player salary was \$2.5 million; the league’s top 15 players made closer to \$30 million each (Basketball Reference, 2019). The league continues its long-time project of courting global audiences and markets in China, Africa, and Europe. Epic team rivalries, charismatic personalities,

and affective storylines draw the attention of global audiences; over 150 million followers subscribe to the NBA’s social media accounts, making it the most discussed league in the world (Saïdi, 2018). To sustain these achievements, the NBA has to foster conditions that permit athletes to maintain high performance while being exposed to high training loads and saturated competition schedules.

This article contextualizes mounting concerns about rest in the NBA by investigating the concurrent rise of a broader promotional sleep culture. The primary objective is to critically explicate the operation of power in a “sleep-friendly” NBA and to understand the broader effects of these social forces, especially in relation to collective understandings of the nature of sleep and sleep problems. This work joins other recent accounts that interrogate the intersections of sport, science, and technology as they intersect with social formations and social disparities (see Sterling & McDonald, 2019). Tensions around athlete recovery cannot be insulated from the obvious and growing cultural preoccupation with sleep or a consumer culture that “has come to see the self and the body in its ultimate commodity form—a sign in which one affectively invests” through the logics of lifestyle and health (Howell & Ingham, 2001, p. 336). Sleep continues to be a key—but often underappreciated—site of governance in modern life. I follow the productive nature of power, tracing not only the role of sleep-related scientific knowledge and expertise in regulating subjectivity, but also paying attention to the ways in which subjects come to actively participate in these discourses as good and enterprising citizens (Rose, 1992, 2007). Discussion about sleep and the NBA must also engage with the racial politics of the league and its influence upon broader debates about the meanings and significance of race in American life (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Leonard, 2012). Sleep offers an entry into thinking about how the application of science and technology in sport can rework collective histories and update social dynamics that pathologize blackness and center whiteness as a normative world view and way of being (see Benjamin, 2019; Phan, 2019).

Though it is seldom acknowledged in popular or scientific conversations, the instrumental use of rest has been a well-known and trusted coaching technique in the NBA for decades. In previous eras, players who might have required extra rest between games would have been listed by the coach as suffering from “tendonitis”

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or “flu-like symptoms.” In one notable instance from 1990, Commissioner David Stern fined the Los Angeles Lakers \$25,000 after Coach Pat Riley decided to rest star players Magic Johnson and James Worthy in a regular season game against the Portland Trail Blazers (McManis, 1990). The Lakers lost 130–88, which, until recently, was one of the most lopsided defeats in the history of the franchise (Land of Basketball, 2019).¹ This historical footnote illustrates that the problem of tired NBA athletes is not new, and this phenomenon has taken different shapes in different times. What is significant is that sleep has not always been privileged in frameworks for understanding tired and worn-out athletes.

For instance, the sleep habits of NBA players were rarely a topic of popular conversation in the 1980s and 1990s. Some evidence of this is found in the coverage of a 1993 incident, when Michael Jordan was spotted at 2:30 a.m. at a casino the night before a playoff game. While critics chastised Jordan for gambling, few mentioned anything about him being up so late. And more to the point, others came to his defense. His coach, Phil Jackson, for example, noted, “He’s a man, he’s not a schoolboy. We don’t have a curfew, we’re adults” (Associated Press, 1993). In the *Chicago Tribune*, Lupica (1993) noted, “No one ever worried about how much sleep [Jordan] was getting until now” (p. B7). Wilbon (1993) came to Jordan’s defense in the *Washington Post*, clearly stating that a lack of sleep did not impact Jordan’s ability to perform: “The only legit question is this: Did staying up to 2:30 a.m. in a casino (. . .) leave him less capable of playing his best against the New York Knicks 18 hours later? Doubtful.” Jordan was depicted as a heroic, tense, and relentless competitor to whom sleep did not come easily; his detachment from “good” sleep was a source of strength and masculine fortitude. Such narratives drew on well-established racialized ideas about Jordan’s “natural,” almost super-human talent and his boundless ability for athletic work (McDonald & Andrews, 2001). With no scientific or technological rationale linking sleep and performance, it was reasonable for Berkow (1991), a sports writer for the *New York Times*, to write, “Whether [Jordan] enjoys a deep sleep the night before or not, he invariably plays like a dream.”

The relative inattention given to sleep during the 1980s and 1990s makes the recent appearance of a promotional sleep culture in the NBA all the more remarkable. A jock culture that once disparaged sleep has been largely replaced with a more “enlightened” one that celebrates the potential of “good” sleep to “build better athletes” (McClusky, 2014).² For its part, the NBA has declared that “player health and wellness continues to be a major focus” for the league and that “sleep is an area we look at closely as part of this effort” (Holmes, 2019). Michelle Roberts, the Executive Director of the National Basketball Association Players Association, suggested that the protection of athlete sleep could be an issue going forward in collective bargaining, and that the union would be “anxious to see any new data analyzing the effects of sleep loss in professional sports” (Holmes, 2019). A generation of NBA athletes practices sleep hygiene in an effort to optimize their bodies for future athletic and commercial success. Ahead of Game 7 of the 2018 Eastern Conference NBA Finals, LeBron James, an athlete who spends upward of \$1.5 million annually to prepare his body for competition, explained that he tries to sleep as much as he can because it is “the best recovery you can possible get” (Gonzales, 2018). Why has the plight of exhausted NBA players become visible in relation to sleep and health now? What are the implications as NBA players become the object of such attention?

The critical studies attached to sport and sleep are limited in their capacity to answer such questions. There are no scholarly

accounts that investigate links among sleep, racialization, and professional sports. In this absence, Farred’s (2014) analysis of the event of the Black athletic body at rest provides a helpful starting point for thinking about what is at stake. In his book, *In Motion, At Rest. The Event of the Athletic Body* (2014), Farred, a professor of Africana Studies and English, theorizes the “Malace in the Palace,” or a sequence of in-game events in 2004 that saw Ron Artest, a Black basketball player, charge into the stands during an NBA game in Detroit to confront a group of fans. Farred (2014) considers the possibilities found in the moments just prior to the brawl, when Artest lay on his back, motionless on the scorer’s table, restful and quiet, right before fans taunted and threw beer on him. In this instance of public immobility, Farred (2014) finds a type of principled refusal to the “demands of perpetual Black athletic motion,” that is fundamental to the NBA (p. 34). Farred is fascinated by how rest and other forms of public stillness, including acts such as kneeling during the national anthem, represent a type of transgressive embodiment that has the capacity to recode the temporality and racial logic of the NBA and its unremitting and dehumanizing expectations of profit and performance. The resting and resistive body that Farred brilliantly captures is not, in fact, exactly the same as the sleeping body. Farred’s work alerts us to the histories, politics, and power that are contained within laboring athletic bodies and professional sport contexts. Sleep invites different kinds of questions. It opens up new horizons for thinking about the management of athletic bodies beyond the basketball court and questions about when and where the workday begins and ends.³

The central argument of this article complicates the notion that rest, broadly conceived of as sleep, is a steadfast and straightforward route to resistance and refusal in high-performance sport contexts such as the NBA. In an era where sleep has become prominent in corporate wellness and commercialized self-help cultures, it is worth asking: “What if more sleep is not really what athletes need?” Such a question does not deny that NBA players, who are systematically exhausted and routinely exposed to jet lag, overtraining, lost or restricted sleep, and fatigue, might benefit from informal and formal policies that prioritize recovery. But, in the long term, the promotion of sleep and the strategic use of rest do not necessarily dislodge underlying racialized logics or capitalist expectations that shape this sport setting. Instead, NBA players and their recovery habits become subject to greater surveillance and new forms of commodification; the quest for productivity and performance colonizes more and more of life. Such developments have obvious consequences for aspiring athletes and sport systems. What might be less apparent is how these social forces also shape collective understandings of sleep difficulties and how we might solve them.

The next section introduces the small but growing interdisciplinary field of critical sleep studies and provides a brief overview of the rise of a promotional sleep culture in North America. Then, the reader is directed to consider the racialized dynamics of the NBA and to note the league’s longstanding interest in overseeing and managing athletes’ bodies. Following this, I scrutinize a variety of recent sleep-friendly developments in the NBA. I examine how the proliferation of cutting-edge sleep science and technologies fosters new forms of surveillance that potentially renew old anxieties about “risky” racialized athletes. Then, I consider the expanding commodification of athlete sleep and the rhetoric that “ordinary” people should try to “sleep like a pro.” The conclusion considers how the growth of promotional sleep culture in professional sport contexts advances individualized, market-based solutions that

obscure emerging scientific research that points to structural forces and historical issues, including the complex role of racism and racial discrimination, in grasping and diminishing sleep disparities.

The Growth of a Promotional Sleep Culture

Today, the global sleep industry is estimated to be worth \$30–\$40 billion and includes sleep technologies, sleep apps, pharmaceutical aids, self-help literature, sleep consultants, and sleep-enhancing products (Bramley, 2018). There are now specialized services (e.g., “sleep coaches” and “napping stations”) and experiences (e.g., high-end hotels and resorts that deliver “premium” sleep experiences) that revolve around “good” sleep. The desire and capacity to obtain high-quality sleep are linked to career building, parenting, health, mindfulness, fitness, travel, leisure, and social status. Despite this, public polling consistently shows that most North American adults sleep less well than they would like. A 2013 report by the American Centre for Disease and Prevention suggests that 50–70 million Americans suffer from sleep disorders and notes that prescriptions for sleep aids tripled from 1998 to 2006 (Chong, Fryar, & Gu, 2013). A survey of 1,500 randomly selected adult Canadians found that 67% of the respondents wished they could get better sleep at night (Pelly, 2016). The National Sleep Foundation, a highly influential nonprofit American sleep advocacy organization, found that “disciplined sleepers reap rewards” in its 2019 *Sleep in America Poll*TM (Colbert, 2019). People with the most consistent sleep schedules reported enhanced daily productivity and next-day physical and emotional well-being (Colbert, 2019). Good sleep has never been seen as more valuable or harder to achieve.

The critical sleep literature has demonstrated that concerns about sleep (as well as anxieties about “rest,” “exhaustion,” “fatigue,” “insomnia,” and “burn out”) are not unique to the present moment (Ekrick, 2006; Schaffner, 2016; Summers-Bremmer, 2008; Wolf-Meyer, 2012). There is no doubt that sleep is a biological necessity. But there is ample evidence to suggest that there is no “natural” way for people to do it. How people sleep and the meanings they attribute to this experience are always negotiated within culture and specific historical and social arrangements of power (Williams, 2005, 2011; Wolf-Meyer, 2012). For most of the 20th century, sleep was considered an unremarkable bodily process that failed to capture the interest of the medical establishment or commercial actors (Kroker, 2007; Williams, 2005, 2011). Technological advancements and shifting priorities in clinical medicine in the last two decades of the 20th century permitted sleep to become a more legitimate object of scientific scrutiny (Kroker, 2007). Scientific studies quickly established that widespread sleep “debt” costs billions in lost productivity, illness, and injury in the workplace (see Dement & Mitler, 1993). Sleep scientists, medical physicians, public health advocates, and an expanding sleep industry sounded alarm bells about a growing epidemic of underslept and overtired people. The task before this eclectic group of sleep advocates and organizations was to challenge and change dominant American cultural scripts that often disparaged sleep.

Moral ideas about sleep are sewn into the fabric of American culture and have particularly strong links to prevailing understandings of masculinity and manhood (Derickson, 2013; Wolf-Meyer, 2012). The preindustrial and industrial eras were marked by a succession of prominent White, male figures—including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison—who championed the virtues of reduced sleep (Derickson, 2013; Wolf-Meyer, 2012).

Dominant understandings of American sleep have also been shaped by the persistence of a Protestant work ethic that depicts sleep as a vice closely associated with idleness and self-indulgence (Derickson, 2013; Wolf-Meyer, 2012). The notion of “heroic wakefulness” (Derickson, 2013) and a belief that the ability to manage on little sleep represents a pathway to upward social mobility have been consistently championed by American politicians, businessmen and -women, military leaders, and athletes throughout the 20th century. Charles Lindbergh, Oprah Winfrey, Samuel Walton (of Wal Mart), and President Donald Trump have all claimed not to need (much) sleep (Derickson, 2013).

There are very few historical accounts that document the sleep habits of people of color, or, for that matter, the historical preferences or practices of the working classes, women, and the poor in America. However, in a society founded upon colonial and slave labor systems, ideas about sleep have often animated social hierarchies and justified White social dominance (Reiss, 2017). Stereotypes forged in the context of slavery and 19th-century biological determinism spread ideas about Black bodies being indefatigable and requiring less sleep than White bodies (Reiss, 2017). Overwork and chronic exhaustion were virtually inescapable for those held in bondage. The combination of endless work and inadequate sleep among enslaved people intensified the likelihood of falling asleep quickly and experiencing difficulty when awakening (Reiss, 2017). Medical authorities and civic leaders who supported slavery interpreted divergent sleeping patterns as proof of natural biological difference and the superiority of the “White” race (Reiss, 2017). Instead of recognizing the signs of sleep deprivation, influential White physicians advanced prejudicial explanations about “laziness” and “inadequate powers of self-control and a lack of intellectual inclination” among the “Black” race (Reiss, 2017, p. 126). Medically backed stereotypes about “lazy” and work-averse Black people quickly infused popular culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and spread with the assistance of traveling minstrel shows, early films, and Jim-Crow-era policies (Reiss, 2017). These racist stereotypes have persisted and have been reworked across the 20th century (e.g., consider the rhetoric of Regan-era “welfare queens”), despite the fact that many Black people have often occupied jobs and social roles that prominently feature long hours and poor, restricted, and fragmented sleep (Reiss, 2017; also see Derickson, 2013).

As dominant understandings of sleep were refashioned around biomedicine in the final two decades of the 20th century, cultural and historical conditions also permitted sleep to become a site of personal improvement and bodily optimization, for some (Williams, 2005, 2011). The logic of lifestyle and the language of self-sufficiency increasingly made individuals “personally responsible for his or her own quality of life” (Howell & Ingham, 2001, p. 337). “Good” sleep became something to cultivate and capitalize upon. This is not to suggest that it was the first time that positive understandings of sleep existed. Historical accounts show that, at the very least, cultural connections between good sleep and good health have existed alongside more critical interpretations for centuries (Crook, 2008; Handley, 2016). However, from the 1980s onward, ideas about good sleep were becoming visible against an expanding biomedical infrastructure and trends that saw the most intimate aspects of life and biological existence become progressively subject to market forces and individualized modes of governance (Rose, 1992, 2007; Williams, 2005, 2011). People—especially the health conscious, risk adverse, middle classes—were invited to manage their sleep in ways that constituted them as productive and enterprising citizens (Rose,

1992, 2007; Williams, 2005, 2011). Sleep represented a simple and direct way to boost productivity and performance in virtually all aspects of daily life.

In our sleep-obsessed times, ideas about “good” sleep flow from a variety of cultural sources and authorities. Professional sport contexts, such as the NBA, are a key and prominent site in which these ideas are being worked out. Celebrity athletes represent an ideal vehicle for promoting sleep health and selling sleep products to groups of citizens who are increasingly required to monitor, quantify, and evaluate their wakefulness and daily performances. To theorize the broader significance of an exhausting but sleep-friendly NBA, it is necessary to reflect on the racial setting of this entertainment sport league.

The Raced Spectacle of the NBA

The NBA is rooted in the historical convergence of political, economic, and social factors; in other words, cultural dynamics that are always already interwoven with the complexity of American race relations. Not every player in the league is racialized as Black, but the majority are. Team owners, coaches, medical staffs, league offices, sport media, and television audiences are predominantly White. It is now well established that the cultural meanings attributed to race and racial categories are the outcomes of social relationships and historical contexts, as opposed to fixed, biological realities (Omi & Winant, 2014). Hierarchical racial categories such as “Black” and “White” vary across time and space and help to reproduce social privilege and social asymmetries in American life (Omi & Winant, 2014). Racial categories are not monolithic or uniform; they are constantly mitigated by other vectors of power, including class, gender, nation, and sexuality (Hill Collins, 2000).

It is next to impossible to theorize men’s North American professional basketball in the current moment without addressing blackness. A robust body of work illustrates that the NBA is a leading institution that creates and circulates ideas and images of blackness in American life (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Farred, 2014; Hughes, 2004; Leonard, 2006, 2012; Leonard & King, 2012). The sport of basketball, in particular, is a prominent site where Black masculinities are produced and regulated in complex and contradictory ways. Black men are at once celebrated, promoted, and commodified, as they are pathologized and criminalized (Leonard & King, 2012). This contradictory pattern resonates with broader histories that involve an assortment of strategies to contain and control Black men. As Ferber (2007) has explained, “Black men have been defined as a threat throughout American history while being accepted in roles that serve and entertain White people, where they can ostensibly be controlled and made to appear nonthreatening” (p. 12).

There is much to say about the way in which NBA players become subject to intense forms of monitoring and regulation, on and off the court. The league, mainstream media, and portions of the White fan base have consistently constructed players as a “problem” (Hughes, 2004; Leonard, 2006, 2012). Dominant media narratives of the 1980s and 1990s suggested that the NBA was “too” Black, not simply in terms of demographics, but perhaps more significantly in cultural and aesthetic terms (Leonard, 2012). Anxieties about hip-hop, gambling, tattoos, booze, and drug-fueled late-night parties produced a moral panic and a sense of public contempt. The so-called “Malace in the Palace” represents but one incident in a longer succession where young, Black famous athletes were portrayed as out of control and unmanageable (Farred, 2014; Leonard & King, 2012). This, even when—such

as in the “Palace” case—the athletes were the targets of other’s violence and taunts (Farred, 2014; Leonard & King, 2012).

The NBA continuously seeks to ensure the marketability of the league by negotiating and countering racist stereotypes that attach to Black male bodies. The league produces website content, videos, and marketing campaigns that represent NBA athletes as respectable and productive, that is, as enticing—and hence more profitable—versions of Black masculinity (Leonard, 2012; Leonard & King, 2012). Complex and competing racial representations are entangled with the league’s desires to accumulate profits and to reproduce a social order that is organized by the interests of White, corporate America. In other words, representations of Black masculinity are enmeshed with knowledge, ideologies, and practices that produce and naturalize White social dominance (McDonald, 2005; McDonald & King, 2012).

As an analytical and conceptual tool, whiteness draws attention to the institutional and systemic dimensions of racial oppression and corresponding systems of social privilege. Whiteness is not a static or singular ideology, a fixed identity, or something that is reducible to the color of one’s skin (Ellsworth, 1997). Whiteness is “a practice; (. . .) a performance; a constantly shifting location upon complex maps of social, economic, and political power” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 264). Whiteness tends to evade scrutiny; its unmarked and normative status as natural and inevitable is itself an effect of dominance (Ellsworth, 1997). Sociologist Joe Feagin (2010) describes a “White racial frame” as a “comprehensive orienting structure” or “a tool kit” that encompasses racial knowledge, images, stereotypes, interpretations, and emotions that shape worldviews and understandings of racial hierarchies (p. 13). Though whiteness is a contested framework (see Fields, 2001; Wiegman, 1999), a robust body of sport literature illustrates its utility in a post-civil-rights era, where “postracial” ideologies (or a belief that the United States has transcended race and racism) continue to perpetuate unequal and unjust racial hierarchies (Hartmann, 2007; Hawzen & Newman, 2017; Kusz, 2007).

High-performance sport settings, such as the NBA, are crucial sites where White power is consolidated, in part, through the regulation of “blackness, albeit in complex, incomplete, and highly contested ways” (Leonard & King, 2012; McDonald & King, 2012, p. 1027). The introduction of a strict off-court dress code in 2005 is illustrative of these dynamics. Players were forbidden from wearing the fashion and styles of hip-hop culture (e.g., Timberland boots, jerseys, do-rags, large jewelry)—even though NBA marketers had for years connected the league to the aesthetic codes and musical styles of hip-hop (Leonard, 2012; Lorenz & Murray, 2014; McDonald & Togliola, 2010). The NBA couched the dress code policy as an opportunity to introduce greater “professionalism” (re: norms of White middle classes) to the league, ignoring their previous engagement with hip-hop youth culture. They also denied that this policy was an attempt to penalize and contain a particular form of urban blackness (Leonard, 2012; Lorenz & Murray, 2014; McDonald & Togliola, 2010).

Given the historical patterns of race and racism outlined earlier, it is reasonable to assume that these dynamics have not simply disappeared. The challenge is to understand how these logics find new expressions in shifting cultural conditions. The rise of a sleep-friendly NBA permits an investigation of how the status quo is reformulated through new articulations of science, technology, and health. It is inviting to consider the radical potential of sleep and its capacity to interrupt “business as usual” by offering NBA athletes a form of sanctuary or withdrawal, at least temporarily, from the weight of creating profit and performance in hostile

conditions. It is also enticing to imagine an increasing regard for sleep as a sign of expanding the types of masculinity and manhood available to NBA athletes. However, such views set the category of sleep outside of cultural forces and power dynamics that specifically target the body. Far from easing the burden of endless work and productivity, the ensuing sections will examine how the development of a sleep-friendly NBA potentially integrates athletes more deeply into systems designed to optimize and control them while simultaneously opening up new avenues for the commodification of Black manhood and masculinity. As you will see next, if discourses about rest promote various ways of managing excessive work, then sleep becomes a strategy to extract more profit and performance, as opposed to less, from the body.

New Surveillance and Familiar Anxieties

When Dr. Charles Czeisler, a Harvard sleep scientist who has worked with the Boston Celtics and Portland Trail Blazers, addressed the 2014 Sloan Analytics Conference, he argued that NBA players are receptive to messages about sleep deprivation because “they live it every day” (Czeisler & Arnovitz, 2014). Campaigns around sleep are often couched as if they are benevolent, humane, and ultimately, in the best interests of athletes. Yet, an array of anti-Black stereotypes, images, and narratives becomes visible in popular discussions about athlete sleep. For instance, ideas about the importance of “teaching” NBA athletes to sleep “properly” are commonplace and echo civilizing narratives of racial uplift. Consider the following description of the “misguided” sleep habits of Andre Iguodala’s earlier life, published in *Wired* magazine:

For 10 years, Andre Iguodala slept terribly. Back in college, the Golden State Warriors forward would play videogames late into the night. Eventually he’d crash, sometimes as late as 4 a.m., only to wake up a few hours later for practice. Then came class. When he was lucky, he’d squeeze in an afternoon nap. Later that night, it’d be back to videogames—either that or *Fresh Prince* reruns. (Gonzales, 2018)

The article continues, explaining how, by working closely with leading sleep experts, in this case, the famous sleep researcher Dr. Cheri Mah, Iguodala changed everything about his sleep. Dr. Mah explained to *Wired*: “We worked on his [Iguodala’s] caffeine intake, his nutrition, his wind-down routine. Big picture, we worked on his whole approach to sleep, to make it more of a priority” (Gonzales, 2018). And the result of this intervention? Iguodala’s playing minutes grew as his three-point shooting improved and his turnovers and fouls decreased. Eventually, he and his team went on to win the 2015 NBA Championship and he was named Finals MVP.

With such favorable outcomes, it is no wonder that so many athletes are becoming more invested in the promises of sleep. Nevertheless, stories about “misguided” sleep habits can reinforce racial hierarchies by strengthening the idea that different ethnic groups or “races” have distinct sleep customs and that there are better and worse ways to sleep. Normative sleep patterns endorsed by scientific authorities like Dr. Mah stress prebed rituals and 7 or 8 hr (or more) of consolidated sleep taken from roughly 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Such forms of recuperation are tightly tied to the spatio-temporal rhythms of White, middle-class life and virtues, such as productivity, rationality, self-control, work ethic, and personal achievement (Wolf-Meyer, 2012). Sleep patterns that deviate from this scientific norm are imagined as if they are chaotic,

juvenile, and the origins of lackluster daily performance. The media often explains insufficient sleep among NBA players by relying on a “ghetto-centric” imagination that reproduces stereotypical ideas about Black experience, including ideas about poor decision making, the perceived pathologies of the Black family, and a mythicized urban landscape (Andrews & Silk, 2010, p. 1627). Divergent sleep styles can fuel common-sense ideologies about Black dysfunction and White exceptionalism and ignore how structural forces (e.g., jet lag or schedules packed with late night games) may make the normative sleep celebrated by science out of reach for many NBA players.

A prosleep agenda in the NBA may also intensify what was already a space and place of hypervisibility and hypersurveillance. Consider how sleep-optimizing companies create novel ways to monitor NBA athletes off the court. Rise Science has built a business on athlete sleep (Rise Science, n.d.). Founders Jeff Kahn, Leon Sasson, and Jacob Kelter were three Northwestern University undergraduate students when they created a biometric sleep-tracking technology system that tucks into an athlete’s mattress. The company currently works with the Chicago Bulls, plus several prominent National Football League and college football teams. It offers tailored sleep planning, ongoing daily guidance, and personalized sleep coaching services; teams usually pay between \$35,000 and \$100,000 annually for services (Dallke, 2016). Rise Science works with Twilo (another tech start-up that specializes in text messaging) to deliver personalized sleep coaching services to NBA athletes. Ninety minutes before bedtime, athletes receive text messages on their phones to remind them to put on specialized glasses that block blue light (Sanders, 2017). Another notification lets them know it is time for bed, at which point players are supposed to get into bed alone, don a sleep mask, and set the room temperature between 62 and 67 °F (Sanders, 2017). The data generated from the biometric sleep tracker are transferred to a team’s computer or server. Every morning, the coaches receive a report that states the team’s “readiness” and notes any potential “high-risk” athletes who did not “fully recover” through nighttime sleep. The athletes also receive their personal sleep data on their phones via a Rise Science app.

The science and technology behind companies like Rise Science are often shrouded in secrecy and protected by business processes. It can be difficult to obtain prices or technical specifics. It is not always clear how different companies or products conceptualize, measure, or predict states such as sleep, fatigue, alertness, or recovery (Karkazis & Fishman, 2017). This lack of transparency contradicts the fact that these services and instruments make the lives of NBA players hypervisible. Sleep technologies carry with them an entirely new potential to make athletes known to the public audience, as well as sport and medical authorities. “Being known” to audiences and authorities has different implications across racial, gendered, sexual, and classed lines (Benjamin, 2019; Eubanks, 2018). In a historical moment of unprecedented technological development, it is vital to recognize that new digital data regimes are not experienced by everyone in the same way (Eubanks, 2018). There is a tendency to ignore how histories of scientific racism and medical discrimination shape the way that many NBA athletes encounter biometric (sleep) technologies (Karkazis & Fishman, 2017). For at least some players, “lingering feelings of inequity and exploitation” make it difficult to fully trust team owners or to feel complete confidence about whose interests these technologies most serve (Karkazis & Fishman, 2017, p. 55).

By demonstrating normative (or even exceptional) commitments to sleep, racialized NBA players may gain a way to construct

an image of themselves as responsible, hard-working citizens whose off-court behavior and personal decision making match the status quo and stand up to the public scrutiny of managers, sport journalists, and sport audiences. Redemptive sleep narratives often feature normative scripts around gender and sexuality that highlight the stabilizing influence of heterosexual family life. For example, when Kobe Bryant met with Arianna Huffington for a profile in the *New York Times* shortly after his retirement from the league, he connected his own journey to appreciating sleep to his maturation as a man and a father. Bryant explained, “I’ve grown. I used to get by on three or four hours a night. I have a hard time shutting off my brain. But I’ve evolved. I’m up to six to eight hours now. (. . .) You know the other major thing about sleep? It gives me more energy to spend time with my family and have fun with my kids” (Galanes, 2014). Implicitly, Bryant’s comments show that the valorization of sleep is about having the “right” priorities as an athlete and a citizen. Despite the seemingly positive and progressive nature of such portrayals, sleep becomes a site to morally distinguish among NBA athletes and to celebrate those (profitable and nonthreatening) Black masculinities that resonate with middle-class notions of respectability, self-reliance, and productivity. This virtue signaling unfolds in a moment when whiteness, color-blind rhetoric, and mainstream middle-class sensibilities deny the salience of race in daily life and promote the belief that racism is something to “overcome” through personal hard work and self-discipline (Hartmann, 2007; Hawzen & Newman, 2017; Kusz, 2007).

While a newfound appreciation for sleep among NBA players could indicate shifting norms around Black masculinity that make room for nourishment and self-care, what remains the same is an instrumental orientation to the body. In other words, the idea that “real” men can value and enjoy sleep, so long as it boosts athletic performance, validates a binary gendered system and fails to challenge the undertones of sexism, homophobia, and a fear of effeminacy that shape such framings in the first place (see Adams, 2011). The embodied skills and styles of thought promoted within a sleep enhancement framework reinforce disciplinary norms and strengthen ideas about personal responsibility (Brown, 2004; Williams, 2005, 2011). NBA players begin to think of themselves in relation to sleep and adjust their daily activities according to the tenets of sleep science and its related technology. But practices and strategies devoted to optimizing sleep are not only self-serving. These efforts integrate athletes more deeply into a sport system, making them more “docile,” that is, simultaneously more productive in economic terms and easier to govern in political terms (Foucault, 1977, pp. 137–139).

Athletes who do not appear to properly prioritize sleep or take the appropriate steps to mitigate fatigue on a daily basis may be labeled as irresponsible, selfish, antisocial, or even dangerous. A greater emphasis on sleep has coincided with rising concerns about NBA players who are “addicted” to video games and multiplayer esports, such as Fortnite and League of Legends. David Fizdale, the ex-head coach of the New York Knicks, lamented that his team’s biggest opponent is not the other team, but rather, it is his own athletes deciding to stay up late to play Fortnite (Shapiro, 2019). Sensational headlines such as “‘It Took My Life Over’: Inside NBA Players’ Fortnite Addiction” (Sepkowitz, 2018) and “Lakers’ Josh Hart Once Played ‘Fortnite’ for 10 Straight Hours Before Game vs. [the Cavaliers]” (Benjamin, 2018) have fueled public interest. Compared with the well-publicized antics of NBA “bad boys” of the 1990s, anxieties about the impact of late-night gaming could appear frivolous, silly, or maybe even dull. Yet a closer

examination highlights a familiar pattern. Ideas about sleep naturalize and reinscribe racial difference; NBA players who fail to sleep in what is regarded as a responsible manner are demonized. Whether NBA players sleep 12 hr a night or whether they fall short of new rest-related responsibilities, these divergent practices collapse to open up new avenues of commodification that reproduce particular ways of understanding modern sleep and its discontents.

Signature Pillows and Alarm Clocks: The Big Business of Sleep and the NBA

It is puzzling that NBA players, a group who may be among the most comprised when it comes to consistently sleeping well, have become highly visible and marketable symbols of a promotional sleep culture. But it is no coincidence. Consider the following passage from Huffington’s (2016) *The Sleep Revolution*:

Athletes speak to something aspirational in us. So the behaviors they exemplify—how they take care of their bodies, how they recharge, and how they go about performing at their best—matter. If future ad campaigns telling us to “Be like Mike” were to send a vital message about the importance of getting enough sleep, it could help teach the next generation that health and fitness are impossible without that firm foundation. Imagine if NBA stars didn’t just have a signature pair of sneakers but a signature pillow or an alarm clock! (p. 145)

Contexts such as the NBA reinforce understandings that suggest sleep is vital to performance in other areas of life and that people should constantly try to improve and maximize themselves through practices of consumption and personal vigilance. This type of individualized rhetoric obscures the fact that, today, many sleep difficulties are rooted in capitalist relations and modern workplaces that require workers to put in more hours, often at an accelerated pace (Brown, 2004; Kroll-Smith, 2008; Williams, 2011).

The NBA and other high-performance sport settings bring ideas, practices, and values about the importance and possibility of “high-performance sleep” to new audiences. Glossy advertising campaigns link celebrity athletes to “ordinary” people who might also be attempting to maximize their bodies and health on a daily basis. For instance, Bedgear (Farmingdale, NY) is an American company that specializes in customized “high-performance bedding.” It offers two premium mattresses (\$549.99 or \$849.99), 21 different pillows (prices range from \$49.99 to \$199.99), eight mattress covers (prices range from \$40 to \$209.00), and seven types of sheets and blankets (prices range from \$59.99 to \$299.99). Bedgear claims that a combination of its signature Dri-Tec[®], Ver-Tex[®], Air-X[®], and Hyper-Cotton[™] fabrics permits efficient heat and moisture management that maximizes recovery on a nightly basis (Bedgear, 2019).

The NBA’s Dallas Mavericks recently signed their second year-long contract with Bedgear. Upon arrival at the team’s preseason training camp, each Maverick is outfitted with a customized performance mattress, mattress protector, pillows, and sheets (P.R. Newswire, 2017). Part of the contract between the Mavericks and Bedgear stipulates that the company can make exclusive offers to season ticket holders and that it can hold game-day promotions and community events designed to educate people about how good sleep leads to better daily performances (P.R. Newswire, 2017). More than 1,450 people entered a contest to “Sleep Like a Mav” in April 2017. Julia McGuire won 50 tickets to a Mavericks’ game, a meet-and-greet with Maverick player Devin

Harris, and an arena sleepover hosted by Bedgear. McGuire brought her two children and a number of their friends. After the sleepover, McGuire said that she and her children were thinking differently about sleep and how hard it can be for professional athletes to sleep: “I definitely appreciate it [sleep] more . . . They [NBA players] never know when they’re going to be able to catch those naps and a good night’s sleep after a game because they just keep going, going, going” (Mavs, 2017).

It is encouraging for NBA fans to publicly recognize the toll of being a professional basketball player and to challenge histories that have positioned groups of racialized Black people as if they are less deserving or desiring of sleep than others. However, celebratory narratives that highlight personal decision making do not adequately address the values and structures that help to produce sleep difficulties in high-performance sport contexts such as the NBA in the first place. Moreover, ideas about the special nature of athlete sleep may reproduce a logic that suggests some groups are more deserving of sleep than others. Athletes’ tiredness is visible, acknowledged, and respected. It is seen as a consequence of effort and hard work. These same ideas and sympathies are not always extended to how other peoples’ tiredness is conceptualized.

Perhaps most significantly, the racial and gendered dynamics of the NBA can have dramatic implications for how the sleep problems of racialized groups are represented, understood, and potentially solved. A number of researchers in the broader field of sleep medicine have shown that race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, poverty, occupation, and other socially significant categories of difference profoundly shape experiences of sleep and sleep disparities (Hale & Do, 2007; Grandner, Williams, Knutson, Roberts, & Jean-Louis, 2016). Black Americans appear to sleep less well than White Americans; the racial “sleep gap” is crucial to address because it “is a disparity that is both caused by social inequalities and likely to perpetuate them” (Resnick & Barton, 2018). Instead of addressing systemic issues that may negatively impact sleep—including temperature; noise; inadequate housing; over, under, or unstable employment; food insecurity; or a lack of affordable child- and eldercare—dominant discourses of the NBA focus attention on individualized, market-based solutions and legitimize the growing surveillance of sleep in the workplace.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to complicate the idea that rest, broadly conceived of as sleep, is a straightforward path to resistance and refusal in the commercialized, hypermediated space of the NBA. Though practices and understandings of sleep in the NBA vary from the 1980s and 1990s, these changes should not be read as “progress.” Discourses and ideas related to sleep in the NBA convey the idea that, to excel in sport (and by extension, in society), it is necessary to constantly optimize the body, even in the “off” hours. The work of being an athlete is never over. Instead of asking questions about the values, ideologies, and structural conditions that make the NBA so tiring, experts and authorities tinker with sleep habits and emphasize personal decision making. The implications of such developments move far beyond the realm of sport. The idea that ordinary people should “sleep like a pro” reinforces longstanding moral ideas that some groups are more deserving of “good” sleep and obscures the structural sources of sleep disparities in sport and society. Instead of examining the exhausting nature of modern sport that comes from the relentless quest for records and profits, these discourses direct attention to the

individual and rehearse the rhetoric of personal responsibility and marketplace solutions. The elevation of sleep as a biological phenomenon often comes at the expense of understanding the cultural and historical forces that shape sleep and sleep difficulties. These trends have significant implications for groups of people whose sleep is impacted, in complicated and multifaceted ways, by the effects of racism and racial discrimination.

Holding together ideas and practices of sleep, science, and technology in the NBA opens up thinking about the limits of athlete welfare, the shifting cultural production of athleticism, the nature of scientific authority, and new forms of surveillance in sport and society. It is essential for critical sport scholars to challenge the values, practices, and logics that make sport settings, such as the NBA, toxic and damaging. Athletes’ experiences of overwork and underrecovery should be a part of that discussion. But it is equally important to recognize the limits of “healthy” high-performance sport and to see how strategies to make competitive sport “healthier”—in this instance, through the promotion of sleep—may ultimately diminish the well-being of athletes in ways that are not immediately obvious and deepen broader health disparities over time. As King (2013) has explained, “Health is not innately good; nor is it innately bad. Rather, the point here is that health is mutable and we must be alert to the diversity of ideological positions it advances and the economic and social structures it entrenches” (p. 98). The recent problem of tired athletes has justified the further penetration of neoliberal ideologies, medical expertise, scientific knowledge, and biometric technologies into the NBA. These are not neutral or apolitical entities; rather, they are embedded with historical values, beliefs, and practices that constitute dominant understanding and shape how it is possible to act upon the social world. These social forces ensure the dominance of White world views and make the sleep habits of athletic Black men hypervisible and the structural, sleep-comprising elements of our society less visible. Ultimately, the promotion of sleep in settings such as the NBA makes us collectively less prepared and less able to adequately address sleep disparities that often reflect and run along racial, gender, and class lines.

Notes

1. Similar events occurred in 1983, when Lakers owner Jerry Buss told Coach Pat Riley that Magic Johnson and James Worthy would rest at home and not travel with the team in Portland (Boren, 2012). The NBA fined the Lakers \$10,000, and many fans wrote to the organization asking for a refund on their tickets. In 1985, Coach Riley rested Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson in a game at Kansas City and was fined an undisclosed amount by the NBA (Boren, 2012).
2. This is not to suggest that the valorization of poor and restricted sleep has been completely erased in the NBA. It is more accurate to notice how ideas that celebrate poor sleep coexist alongside powerful and persuasive discourses about “good” sleep.
3. Wajcman (2015) notes how the spread of the Internet, cell phones, laptop computers, and other technologies in late capitalism changes the nature of many workplaces by blurring boundaries between home and work and the private and public spheres.

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