

Malice at the Palace: A Critical Film Analysis of Race and Power in Sports

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The ESPN documentary film *Untold: Malice at the Palace* (2021) focuses on one of the most unusual and racially charged events in pro sports. The game took place on November 19, 2004, at The Palace of Auburn Hills in Michigan between the Indiana Pacers and the Detroit Pistons. Late in the game, Ben Wallace of the Pistons shoves Ron Artest in response to a hard personal foul by Artest. Immediately, the players of both teams converged as tensions were high; Artest put himself in a temporary time-out by lying down on the scorer's table. While he lay there, a fan in the stands threw a drink directly into Artest's physical body, provoking Artest to run into the stands and punch the white male fan who attacked him. Then, a fan comes down to the court, and a complete fight breaks loose. This series of events caused the game to be called off and resulted in unprecedented consequences, including lengthy suspensions for players, criminal charges, lawsuits, and significant fines. Ron Artest received the longest suspension in NBA history for a single event: 86 games, including the playoffs.

The documentary focuses on how the brawl became a defining moment in sports history, raising questions about player-fan interactions, athlete behavior, and, in particular, media framing of predominantly black athletes involved in high-profile conflicts. It also prompted the NBA to implement stricter security measures and conduct policies—interviews with players such as Artest, Stephen Jackson, and Jermaine O'Neal, who received harsh penalties. The "Malice at the Palace" brawl reveals, perhaps more vividly than many other events, how socially widespread racial bias permeates both sports and media narratives. The media's portrayal of black athletes as violent and criminal played a critical role in reinforcing existing racial stereotypes. This presentation, in turn, supported broader societal narratives that continue to marginalize black individuals. This movie is a sociologically critical look at

the event because immediately, the media portrayal jumped to stereotypes and blamed the black athletes when, in reality, it was a white fan responsible for the escalation of the evening.

Media portrayal of black men

The portrayal of black athletes as inherently violent connects to broader societal ideologies designed to preserve racial hierarchies, as discussed below. This broad cultural ideology also influences how black male athletes are consistently portrayed in sports media, further perpetuating racial stereotypes. In his article regarding the criminalization of the black male media coverage of sports in a broad sense as racially prejudiced, Craig (2016) explains how “Sports media have been found to promote stereotypical and divisive ideologies among races[. . .] and function as sites of constantly shifting struggles over race, ethnicity, and meaning. The racial undertones in sports commentary are part of the institutionalized hegemony allowing racist ideologies of the past to persist into the present” (p.24). Craig (2016) situates these portrayals within a larger framework of institutionalized racism, where sports media maintain existing power structures by marginalizing black athletes

A specific example of these racial undertones presents itself when the announcer states, “Ron Artest has a look in his eye that is very scary right now.” This statement alone likens Artest to a monster or demon. However, in reality, Ron Artest was lying on the table when the fight broke out. Yet, after Artest was assaulted and widely disrespected by a fan throwing a drink at him while he lay there after he ran to defend himself, he is portrayed as scary, criminal, and vicious.

The documentary then proceeds to show multiple clips of new media sources over the following days enforcing these racial stereotypes, such as “For a zillion dollars, you think these guys could control themselves.” This type of statement supports what Coakley discusses about how sports is a space for the perpetuation of stereotyping, as “over the past three centuries, many whites in the United States grew up fearing the power of black male bodies, feeling anxious about their sexual capacities and being

fascinated by their physical movements [has enabled some black men to use their bodies as entertainment commodities [. . .] on athletic fields. (Coakley 2021, 263). The film uses player interviews to demonstrate the negative effect this had on the players and the continued criminalization of their bodies

Racial Stereotypes to Preserve Power Structure

Artest became the focus of the narrative and portrayal of the event because he broke a cardinal rule of sports and society: black players (or black men) do not retaliate against the actions of a white man, or there are severe consequences. History is full of stories demonstrating how widespread this cultural ideology is. Coakley (2021) presents the presence of orthodox ideologies and their role in preserving the power structure in our society. He states that because men “ occupy higher positions of power and influence in greater numbers than [women] do. Of course, this means that some men- but not all men- have a strong personal interest in preserving the two-sex system and the ideology it supports” (pg 300). The cultural connection here is that “race is much like gender. It consists of meaning, performance, and organization,” and this connection is in the way that cultural ideologies are “built into the cultural fabric of [. . .] of the United States. [. . .] It is reproduced in connection with general cultural perspectives and images in stories in children's books, textbooks, popular films, television programs, video games, song lyrics, and other media content. We incorporate these perspectives, images, and stories into our lives to the extent that we perceive them to be compatible with our experience” (Coakley, 2021, pg 257). The media’s portrayal of all black players involved as “thugs” and “disgraceful” supported the cultural ideology of any white man who views black athletes as talented, yet solely available for their entertainment and within very clearly defined boundaries. After all, the white male fan pays for the athlete to have a career in sports, as they pay them (and therefore own a piece of them) through ticket purchases or cable subscriptions, etc. When a black player challenges this

engrained entertainment ideology, this is a disruption of the orthodox racial hierarchy. To hear the media describe the players as “thugs” and “disgraceful” over the next several weeks is compatible with the racially indoctrinated white experience and way of thinking. In this way, the media portrayal continued to perpetuate a racial hierarchy in sports and society, one where black men exist as the property of white people. Additionally, the media coverage supported the engrained cultural perspective that any black man who retaliates is in the wrong and must be punished.

Punishment of black male athletes

The second half of the film discusses the stringent punishments laid on the involved black athletes and how these were punitive and unnecessary. Then NBA Commissioner Stern is shown on the screen as he states the extensive season suspension for Artest, 30 games for Jackson, 25 for O’Neal, six for Wallace, and one for Reggie Miller, who was not even involved in the altercation. Artest’s consequence remains the most extended suspension in NBA history for a single incident (FILM). During a media presser following the evening, Stern was asked whether the league's disciplinary committee had decided unanimously on the disciplinary actions. Stern responded, "It was unanimous, 1-0. I decided it." Stern’s commanding assertion underscored his authority, as well as highlighted the power imbalance within the NBA, where a white male commissioner had the final say over the predominantly black athletes. Stern’s lack of focus on the fan’s instigating actions further reinforced this dynamic. By emphasizing the players' behavior while downplaying the fan's role, Stern upheld the cultural narrative that black athletes must adhere to strict behavioral codes under predominantly white oversight. This dynamic perpetuated the orthodox racial hierarchies that Coakley (2021) describes, where black bodies are commodified for entertainment but harshly punished when stepping outside the expected roles. Thus, the portrayal of Artest and other black athletes as inherently violent not only justified the harsh penalties but also reinforced existing racial hierarchies in sports and society.

Conclusion

Malice in the Palace thoroughly looks at the November 19, 2008 event, which some describe as “the worst night in NBA history” (NBA, 2021). The film focuses on the players involved that evening, effectively letting them tell their side of the story and how they felt about the incident. The film does not just retell the events of the evening; it dives deep into the black experience of the incident and is a stark reminder of how racial ideologies are woven into the fabric of sports and media. The event and its aftermath, especially as presented by the media, show just how important it is to critically analyze the way black athletes continue to be characterized, disciplined, and controlled within predominantly white power structures. As society continues to grapple with issues of race, power, and representation, this documentary is a powerful insight into the enduring legacy of systemic racism in sports.

References

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