

# How Black male college athletes deal with anti-Black stereotypes on campus

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In an effort to avoid stereotypes about Black male athletes, such as being labeled a "[dumb jock](#)," Spike, a college football player, says he wore athletic clothes to class as little as possible.

"I mean, granted, I'm a 6-foot-4, 240-pound Black kid on campus, so it's kind of hard to get away from that," he said. "But I didn't want any, you know, significant confirmation that I was an athlete. So, I just wore like a collared shirt, jeans and nice shoes every day."

Trey, a baseball player, refrained from speaking up or sharing [personal information](#)—even with his teammates.

He said he was often "outnumbered in opinion" as he was one of two Black athletes on a team of 40, which led to him "not even wanting to speak up" about issues that may cause conflict with others. "I'm a Black student-athlete and, like, that already makes me have to [carry myself](#) a different way," he said.

I'm a professor of sport management who [researches](#) the [experiences of Black male college athletes](#). During the 2020–21 [academic year](#), I [interviewed 16 Black male college athletes](#) at Division I colleges across the U.S. I wanted to know how they changed their behavior to navigate stereotypes about them.

I also asked participants, who competed in numerous sports—including football, baseball, cheer, diving, and track and field—to record audio diaries about the topic as part of the study.

I found that these [college athletes](#), at times, went out of their way to change how they present themselves to others in order to avoid anti-Black racism and "dumb jock" stereotypes on campus. At other times, they pushed back against these stereotypes as a form of resistance.

## **'I don't bring up that I am a student-athlete'**

[Self-presentation](#) refers to how someone acts or behaves during social interactions in order to influence how others perceive them. For

example, a person may change how they speak, or their word choices, depending on who is around them.

The Black male college athletes in my study altered their presentation in a number of ways, including their dress or clothing and their speech. They also limited how much information they shared, and at times they hid details about their identity.

Marc, another [football player](#), reflected on how being a Black male college athlete affected how he spoke—both the frequency and delivery—during class. "You have to be, like, more engaged," he said. "You got to assert yourself more and you got to be more analytic about things."

These adjustments were not restricted to academic environments. Marc was also careful about what information he shared in various athletic settings, too. "You do not really [talk about personal stuff](#) or anything like that," he said.

Participants did not want their vulnerabilities used against them by their coaches or academic advisers.

Another strategy Black male college athletes used was hiding details about their identity—most often their athletic identity. Tyler, a track athlete, noted, "I try to make sure I don't bring up that I am a student-athlete. I'm just trying to build my [identity away from the sport](#)."

## **Black students, white campuses**

Black men represent about [6% of total college students](#) in U.S. four-year public institutions. Yet at Division I schools, the highest level of college [athletic competition](#), they represent roughly [45% of football players](#) and [51% of men's basketball players](#).

Overall, Black men represent [12% of all Division I college athletes](#), excluding historically Black colleges and universities.

Meanwhile, at Power Five schools, where [college football](#) is a big-time business, as many as [1 in 6 Black male students](#) are athletes, compared with 1 in 50 white students.

The vast majority of Division I schools are predominantly white institutions. Their athletic departments, including coaching staffs and administrators, are [overwhelmingly white](#). For example, 78% of Division I athletic directors, 81% of head coaches, 68% of assistant coaches and 90% of head athletic trainers [are white](#).

Similar to their athletic experience, these athletes do not see many other Black people across campus. Faculty on these campuses are [93% non-Black](#).

## **Racism and discrimination**

It is well documented that Black male college athletes [experience racism and discrimination](#) while attending these predominantly white schools. This includes, for example, [unequal enforcement of school policies](#) and [less access to educational opportunities](#).

They are discriminated against for being Black, [for being Black males](#) and for being athletes. Although touted for their physical prowess, Black male athletes are often [labeled "dumb jocks"](#)—their intelligence somehow discredited by their [physical stature](#).

They are sometimes seen by students, faculty, staff and even fans as [lacking the intellectual ability](#) and motivation to succeed academically. They are characterized as illegitimate students who undermine the academic mission of the university and [receive special treatment](#).

One study found that professors and academic counselors had [lower academic expectations](#) of Black college athletes compared with their white counterparts and that these athletes lacked autonomy in making academic decisions. Academic counselors often selected their courses, as opposed to the athletes registering themselves, which made the [athletes feel powerless](#).

Another study found that faculty members were more likely to attribute Black male college athletes' success to policies, [such as affirmative action](#), instead of their merits, as they did for white athletes.

## **Resisting societal pressure**

Not all the athletes altered their behavior or appearance to avoid anti-Black stereotypes. Keyvon, a football player, expressed that he presents himself authentically in predominantly white spaces as a way to "[apply pressure](#)" and force people to get comfortable with his Blackness.

Being a big-time college athlete indeed [presents privileges](#), such as a pseudo-celebrity status, which at times can shield Black male college athletes from the impact of stereotypes and anti-Blackness. However, this is often the case solely when Black males perform well in their sport.

Sport performance should not determine how people treat Black male college athletes. Nor should Black male college athletes be [placed in a box](#) when it comes to how they present themselves, or risk anti-Black discrimination if they express themselves authentically. Ultimately, Black male college athletes will present themselves in a manner they deem appropriate—whether that aligns with what society expects or not.

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