

College Sports Are Affirmative Action for Rich White Students

Athletes are often held to a lower standard by admissions officers, and in the Ivy League, 65 percent of players are white.

By [Saahil Desai](#) October 23, 2018



Jessica Hill / AP

Quick, think of a college athlete. Chances are the person who comes to mind is a football or basketball player at a powerhouse Division I school like Louisiana State University or the University of Kentucky. Maybe the player resembles, say, Joel Embiid, who turned a chiseled, 7-foot frame into a full-ride scholarship at the University of Kansas before ascending to NBA

stardom.

But the typical student athlete more often plays a less blockbuster sport—lacrosse, maybe, or tennis—and in many cases comes from a well-to-do family that has shelled out thousands and thousands of dollars over the years to nurture a budding athletic talent. And a majority of the time, they're white.

The most visible college athletes—the ones running across bar-TV screens or in full-color photographs on newspaper sports pages—tend to be black. Indeed, college football and basketball players [skew](#) disproportionately African American. But, says Kirsten Hextrum, a professor of educational leadership at the University of Oklahoma, "the black men in these two sports are not the reality of who has access to college sports."

By the National Collegiate Athletic Association's [own estimate](#), 61 percent of student athletes last year were white. At elite colleges, that number is even higher: 65 percent in the Ivy League, not including international students, and 79 percent in the Division III New England Small College Athletic Conference, which includes elite liberal-arts colleges like Williams College and Amherst College. As Harvard [heads to court](#) to fend off allegations that it [discriminates against Asian American applicants](#), the plaintiffs behind the case have released to the public reams and reams of data analyzing the school's admissions process. They allege that one factor used in admissions, called "personal rating," systematically disadvantages Asian American students. But tucked into the [168-page analysis](#) of Harvard's admissions data is a curious statistic about another nonacademic factor considered by the school: athletics.

All applicants to Harvard are ranked on a scale of one to six based on their academic qualifications, and athletes who scored a four were accepted at a

rate of about 70 percent. Yet the admit rate for nonathletes with the same score was 0.076 percent—nearly 1,000 times lower. Similarly, 83 percent of athletes with a top academic score got an acceptance letter, [compared](#) with 16 percent of nonathletes. Legacy admissions policies get a [lot of flak](#) for privileging white applicants, but athletes have a much bigger effect on admissions, and make up a much bigger percentage of the class. And it's not just Harvard—in 2002, James Schulman and former Princeton University President William Bowen looked at 30 selective colleges and [found](#) that athletes were given a 48 percent boost in admissions, compared with 25 percent for legacies and 18 percent for racial minorities.

[Read: What the Harvard trial is really about](#)

Put another way, college sports at elite schools are a quiet sort of affirmative action for affluent white kids, and play a big role in keeping these institutions so stubbornly white and affluent. What makes this all the more perplexing, says John Thelin, a historian of higher education at the University of Kentucky, is that “no other nation has the equivalent of American college sports.” It's a particular quirk of the American higher-education system that ultimately has major ramifications for who gets in—and who doesn't—to selective colleges.

When it comes to college athletics, football and basketball command the most public attention, but in the background is a phalanx of lower-profile sports favored by white kids, which often cost a small fortune for a student participating at a top level. Ivy League sports like sailing, golf, water polo, fencing, and lacrosse aren't typically staples of urban high schools with big nonwhite populations; they have entrenched reputations as suburban, country-club sports. According to the NCAA, of the 232 Division I sailors last year, none [were](#) black. Eighty-five percent of college lacrosse players [were](#)

white, as well as 90 percent of ice-hockey players.

And the cost of playing these sports can be sky high. "There are high economic barriers to entering in this highly specialized sports system," Hextrum says. "White people are concentrated in areas that are resource rich and have greater access to those economic resources." Getting good enough at a sport to have a shot at playing collegiately often necessitates coaching, summer camps, traveling for tournaments, and a mountain of equipment. One in five families of an elite high-school athlete [spend](#) \$1,000 a month on sports—the average family of a lacrosse player [spends](#) nearly \$8,000 a year. Kids from low-income families participate in youth sports at almost half the rate of affluent families, according to a [report](#) from the Aspen Institute. It's no surprise, then, that per *The Harvard Crimson's* annual freshman survey, 46.3 percent of recruited athletes in the class of 2022 [hail from families](#) with household incomes of \$250,000 or higher, compared with one-third of the class as a whole.

But there are other, more veiled factors that may also boost the numbers of white college athletes. For one, many elite colleges—including Ivy League schools and smaller Division III colleges—don't offer athletic scholarships, so they can't give low-income sports stars a free ride like big, Division I schools can. Michele Hernandez Bayliss, a private college counselor and a former assistant admissions dean at Dartmouth College, walked me through the process: Over the summer, coaches compile lists of the athletes they want, which they then share with the admissions office. "Most of the recruiting happens in the early rounds. Once coaches have their list, they would rather wrap up the whole process early rather than wait until the spring," Hernandez said. That the recruited athletes are chosen early on is seemingly mundane, but it [warps the process](#) in favor of wealthier kids who can send in early-decision applications to selective schools without fretting about the size of the financial-aid package they'll receive.

In a recently published [study](#) in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Hextrum interviewed 47 athletes at an unnamed elite, Division I college about how they earned a coveted spot at the university. As she writes, there are all sorts of hidden advantages that “secure greater access to elite colleges for white middle-class communities via athletic participation.” Athletes often get noticed by making visits to the college and sending coaches intensely curated portfolios highlighting their prowess. Affluent kids, “due to their community and social networks, are better at navigating this process,” she told me. And in some cases, she found, cozy relationships between high-school and college coaches can facilitate access for students: “There were instances where if you knew someone who knew someone, you could use that advantage to get a shortcut route into athletics.”

At schools like the University of Alabama and Ohio State University with storied teams that gin up media attention rivaling the big leagues, athletics is a cash cow: In 2017, the Ohio State athletics program [brought in](#) \$167 million in revenue. Yet, [according to the NCAA](#), at all but 20 colleges, athletics programs lose more money than they make. That raises a baffling question: Why are colleges willing to lower their admissions standards to recruit the best athletes when their expensive sports programs are unlikely to return the investment?

For some colleges, it’s a ploy to burnish their national reputation by getting their name out there, on the field or on the court. And, in some cases, it works: After Florida Gulf Coast University made a David-and-Goliath-like run to the March Madness Sweet 16 in 2013, the school saw a 27.5 percent [jump in applicants](#) the following year.

[Read: The March Madness application bump](#)

Incidental marketing aside, sports can also make a college seem more

attractive to its students. Athletics, Thelin says, "is one of the few unifying activities that can bring the school together. Football, especially." And, he told me, college sports can nurture loyalty to an institution years after a student leaves campus, and perhaps inspire one to donate money to the school.

But how many people are really going to lacrosse games and sailing meets and the other sporting events that don't typically have graduates reaching for their checkbook? Part of it is the power of tradition: For more than a century, colleges—starting with elite schools in the Northeast—have fixated on physical activity and sports as a way to mold young, impressionable students to their making. That continues today: "Strong academic colleges often like to at least offer the prospect of the sound mind, sound body," Thelin says. And, still, colleges need to field a minimum number of sports to join a particular conference, such as the Ivy League, which prevents them from putting all their cards on the table for high-profile sports exclusively.

As Harvard's admission policies go through the wringer, college sports has largely evaded scrutiny, even among the plaintiffs accusing the school of discrimination. "People are complaining about minority students," Hernandez says, "but athletes are taking up almost a fifth of the class [at Harvard], and they're lowering the academic standards quite a bit."

Granted, athletes at elite schools are far from brain-dead jocks—they work long, grueling hours to balance their academic workload with games, practices, and travel, and have to maintain a certain grade point average to stay eligible to play their sport. But, as the Harvard case seems poised to inch its way to the Supreme Court, where a majority of justices could roll back affirmative action, it's worth considering how other admissions practices put a thumb on the scale for white students. The processes that funnel rich white athletes to selective colleges aren't going anywhere in the

short term, but in a possible future in which colleges can no longer consider race in admissions, there could be renewed public pressure for these schools to clear the musty cobwebs of the admissions process that undermine their self-proclaimed ethos as America's engines of social mobility.

"It's curious to me that these elite universities are holding on to these policies, because I think they expose the contradictions of what universities do in admissions," says the Harvard professor Natasha Warikoo. "They're blatantly privileging already privileged groups."

Update: This article has been updated to remove identifying information about a student athlete, to protect his privacy.