



Dropping the Ball

The Power of Sports

Aaron L. Miller

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The power of sports might be the greatest for a parent. Watching one's child run, jump, or score is a true electric thrill. My son is nearly two years old, but when he puts the basketball in his two-foot bucket, the widest smile you can imagine overcomes me.

Judging LaVar for his "click-bait" comments alone would be unfair, shortsighted, and evince a lack of understanding regarding the systematic institutional injustices that impact his sons and other young athletes like them.

All of which is why LaVar Ball – the outspoken father of the supremely talented UCLA men's basketball team freshman, Lonzo Ball – has been on my mind for many months now. Lonzo Ball will likely be lottery pick in the NBA's Draft on June 22nd, but LaVar's much maligned words have drawn more attention to the Ball family business and the nature of sports parenting today than to Lonzo's ball handling skills.

Among other things, LaVar, who himself played college basketball for Washington State, **said** that "he could 'kill' Michael Jordan one-on-one," that Lonzo is better than Golden State Warrior superstar Stephen Curry, and that all his sons were destined to play in the NBA, largely because he is an athletic trainer, his wife is a PE teacher, and their last name is Ball. Finally, he added that Lonzo would **only** play for the LA Lakers. When the question of a professional shoe deal for his three sons—the younger two Ball sons are also expected to play for UCLA—arose, LaVar said, "A billion dollars, it has to be there. That's our number, a billion, straight out of the gate. And you don't even have to give it to me all up front. Give us \$100 mil over 10 years."

In some respects, LaVar Ball **appears to be a prime example of a "bad" sports parent:**

- He speaks for his children, effectively silencing them;
- He elevates his own interests and priorities above theirs; and,
- He makes a public spectacle of his children, which may also publicly humiliate them.

The trouble is, much of the media has not contextualized LaVar Ball's comments. His sons play "big-time" college basketball and are institutionally exploited by the sports media, universities like UCLA (which is—full disclosure—my alma mater), and the NCAA. Without understanding this, one cannot make sense of LaVar's comments. In fact, these comments reveal a much more complicated and unsettling societal situation: the exploitation of big-time college—and even younger—athletes.

Whether LaVar Ball is one or not, "bad" sports parents are part of a larger ecosystem of youth athlete exploitation. In *Until it Hurts*, Mark Hyman argues that America has an "obsession" with youth sports: since the otherworldly success of Tiger Woods, whose father groomed him for golf stardom from an "unusually early age," countless American parents see their own parental efforts as the only obstacle to their child's athletic success. Documentaries like *HBO's Trophy Kids showcase the worst of the worst, following overbearing parents* as they push their budding athletes.

All of the blame should not fall on parents. Sportswriters in the 24-hour news cycle need stories, and sensational stories sell more advertisements and generate more mouse clicks. Worse still are the *increasing number of reality TV shows*, like *Friday Night Tykes*, that treat youth sports as dramatic entertainment.

So judging LaVar for his "click-bait" comments alone would be unfair, shortsighted, and evince a lack of understanding regarding the systematic institutional injustices that impact his sons and other young athletes like them. No one really knew who the Ball family was nine months ago, at least on a national level, making LaVar an easy lightning rod for the media to exploit. He's new to the party, and everyone thinks he talks funny. Certainly he deserves some squints for his over-the-top statements, many of which have been in poor taste.

As a father, LaVar is rightfully seeking to secure as much as he can from his sons' successes, not to mention physical health and long-term financial security. He may not change this long broken system, but his comments about it are important—and revealing—nonetheless.

But the NCAA and the "big-time" sports colleges exploit his son and other "unpaid professionals" in a *shameful* way. Following research by psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, I see these young athletes as "emerging adults," still green behind the ears and not yet full-blown adults. No matter how

talented they are, they should not be treated like professionals, even if the industry in which they “play” is increasingly professionalized (not to mention extremely commercialized). If we focus only on Ball’s incendiary comments, we risk forgetting that “big-time” college athletes are still just kids (being used by other adults).

LaVar has insisted that his sons will all be “one-and-done,” meaning they will play just one year of college basketball before turning pro. (The NBA effectively requires high school players to play at least one year of college ball, thus the term “one-and-done”.) Moreover, LaVar has insisted that upon turning pro his sons will be represented by his family company, **Big Ballers Brand**. While these statements may appear overbearing, they are also pragmatic: his sons risk physical injury by playing college ball “too long,” which may lower their NBA “draft stock,” and their professional and financial interests may be better protected under the umbrella of his own brand.

The **NCAA requires athletes to play ball as “amateurs” and agree to behave according to a 440-page NCAA code of conduct manual for student athletes**. As an amateur player, the NCAA prohibits Lonzo from selling his likeness to companies who wish to use him as a sponsor. This NCAA contract is simply unfair, as is the relationship between Lonzo, UCLA, and the NCAA, which all financially benefit from Lonzo’s talents without providing proper compensation. **US federal courts have by and large ignored or sidestepped the question of whether student-athletes are university employees**, so the question of whether they have the right to unionize – and collectively bargain for higher “wages,” **remains unanswered**. This may be where LaVar’s efforts to shape the public narrative of his sons’ lives become defensible, if not necessary.

Say what you want about LaVar Ball’s undoubtedly boastful and family-focused statements, but remember that he understands the unfair power relationships between his son and the institutions that claim to be interested in his **welfare**. In reality, these institutions are using athletes like Lonzo as marketing tools and cheap labor to build their own brands. LaVar is just the latest to “join the party.” As a father, LaVar is rightfully seeking to secure as much as he can from his sons’ successes, not to mention physical health and long-term financial security. He may not change this long broken system, but his comments about it are important—and revealing—nonetheless.

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In this monthly column, "The Power of Sports," Miller considers the social and political nature of sports in American society, with an eye toward opening the minds of readers to the seriousness of these so-called escapes.

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