

Black lives matter in LSU sports

By Jasmine Edmonson
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LSU Women's Basketball player and sophomore Domonique Davis wasn't surprised when she received backlash for forming a student-athlete organization that advocates for an end to racial inequity toward Black people. Some collegiate sports fans don't want student-athletes to be involved with human rights movements that are politicized, such as Black Lives Matter.

The sophomore said the Black Student-Athlete Association formed over the summer after the death of George Floyd, a Black man who died when a police officer knelt on his neck for more than 8 minutes on May 25, 2020. Floyd gained global attention when the video of his death circulated on different media platforms.

"The organization was needed to show the LSU community and other communities that racism is wrong," Davis said.

It was painful for Davis to see the video of Floyd's death. She couldn't stop questioning why the officer knelt on the neck of a defenseless, Black man. That day, she knew it was important to be a part of the uncomfortable conversation about racism, she said.

"It's something that really stuck," she said. "You saw someone call for their mother. You saw somebody take their last breath."

The basketball player attended a "Rally for Unity" between LSU and Southern University during the summer. The rally's purpose was to address tensions between the predominantly white university and historically Black one and promote reconciliation, she said.

Davis said Southern University organizations that advocate for racial equity were present at the rally and further inspired her to create BSAA.

"It made me realize athletes have a big voice," she said. "I knew we had to form something similar at LSU."

On Sept. 12, 2020, BSAA organized a unity walk around Tiger Stadium at LSU. The walk denounced racial injustice. LSU student-athletes and LSU Athletics' faculty and staff participated in the event. The walk set the momentum for LSU Athletics' journey to actively creating racial equity for Black student-athletes and employees.



Domonique Davis, a point guard position player for Louisiana State University's Women's Basketball, said some fans forget collegiate athletes have more values than just athletics. Davis spoke at a unity walk, she helped to organize with LSU's Black Student-Athlete Association, on Sept. 12, 2020. As a speaker at the event, she denounced racial injustice and urged unity. The basketball player said she was nervous to speak because she doesn't feel comfortable talking in front of large crowds. Her teammates gave her words of encouragement before she spoke. She said the notion she needed to raise awareness about racial inequity further calmed her nerves. She added that she felt proud after delivering her speech, which ended with a loud applause.

Courtesy of LSU Athletics

Bill Franques, a senior associate communications director at LSU Athletics, said the communications department is using LSU Athletics' social media platforms to raise awareness about racial inequity. The department wants sport fans to know LSU Athletics stands in solidarity with its Black student-athletes.

"We plan to continue being vocal and visual to demonstrate the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement," he said.

The senior associate communications director said LSU Athletics' chief faculty are developing plans that will push for progressive change within each department. This year, LSU Athletics formed three diversity and inclusion councils to support student-athletes, faculty and staff who feel underrepresented. Each council is primarily focused on improving racial equity.

One of the three councils LSU Athletics created is the Leadership Council. The council's mission is to help guide sustainable progress that results in an inclusive, equitable and transformational athletics program. Franques is a member of the council.

"It's extremely rewarding to be part of the council," Franques said. "We're just getting started."

The Coach and Staff Council strives to further understand the importance of diversity and inclusion through education while integrating inclusive practices into hiring, training and development, retention and promotion. Members will help achieve the department's goal of diversity.

The Student-Athlete Council's mission is to provide an equitable and supportive experience for LSU student-athletes of all ethnicities and other identifying markers.

Fran Flory, the head coach for volleyball at LSU Athletics and member of the Leadership Council, said education is the first step non-Black coaches should engage in to be a good ally for their Black student-athletes. She learned strategies to become a better ally by joining the council.

"The educational piece has been so valuable to LSU Athletics' faculty and staff," she said. "Now, we understand what must be done to create a more equal society."

Advocating for racial justice, like LSU coaches did at the unity walk, is another way non-Black coaches can show allyship toward Black student-athletes. The unity walk made her proud because everyone's voices were heard. The walk gave Black student-athletes the opportunity to step up into an incredible leadership role, she said.

"I hope our Black student-athletes not only feel empowered by their athletic abilities but by who they are as a person," she said.

Ashley Johnson, the director of player development for LSU Women's Basketball and member of the Student-Athlete Council, said coaches play an integral role in molding student-athletes into young adults who are readily prepared for post-collegiate life. Coaches must understand the experiences of all their student-athletes to support and help them grow.

"The benefit of having an ally is you don't feel like you're facing adversity alone," Johnson said.

Like coaches, non-Black student-athletes should show allyship toward Black teammates, she said.

"It's important to know you have people who have your back when you're publicly expressing your opinion on a topic that some people may not agree with," she said.

Lori Martin, a professor of sociology in the African and African American Studies program at LSU, said when non-Black people are educated on the Black experience, it's easier for them to become allies.

Martin advises students and LSU faculty and staff to enroll in Black studies courses to better understand systemic racism in all sectors of society, such as athletics. People of all ethnicities will begin to realize shared emotions toward racial injustice when they take a course, she said.

“What I think is so beautiful about African American study courses is that they demonstrate the humanity and dignity of not just Blacks, but all people,” Martin said. “They make it clear that the struggle for liberation and social justice issues, when led by Black people, has always been a broader struggle for human dignity and rights for everyone.”

Martin also serves as a member on the Leadership Council and Executive Advisory Board for BSAA. The professor is helping to lead conversations that educate LSU Athletics' faculty and staff on racial inequity while encouraging student-athletes to publicly support the Black Lives Matter movement if they believe in its cause, she said.

The professor believes student-athletes have the power to push the conversation forward about racism because they have a large platform. Athletes continue to spark relevant conversations because most of their fans are willing to listen, she said.

“I'm happy that the Black Student-Athlete Association, as well as other campus groups, are really trying to push the administration,” she said. “I'm happy to be supportive in their efforts. They motivate me to be someone who can help them make their initiatives a reality.”

Davis supports Martin's idea that student-athletes should use their platforms for a good cause. She encourages LSU student-athletes to raise awareness about racism toward the Black community. She sees LSU student-athletes as a family of leaders who can elicit progressive change through unity only:

“A house divided can't stand.”