

# GRAB BAG

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## BOOKMONGER

### How privilege works — on and off the field

Tackling racism is nothing new to David J. Leonard. As a Washington State University professor who focuses on critical culture, gender and race studies, he writes regularly — in both academic journals and for public outlets — about racism and inequality in media, in the criminal justice system, and in society overall.

In his new book, “Playing While White: Privilege and Power On and Off the Field,” Leonard examines the racism that pervades the American sports culture, from football and basketball to NASCAR and snowboarding.

The fact that Leonard is white does not buffer his sharp critiques. “Whiteness is the ultimate ‘get out of jail free’ card,” he writes, “a lifetime pass to go on with your life without apologies or consequences.”

Indeed, throughout this book, and across a broad spectrum of sports, Leonard examines an array of indiscretions, mistakes and crimes committed by black athletes and holds those up side by side with similar behaviors committed by white athletes. Whether it’s a tolerance for or impugning of trash talking, or a reaction to more violent or destructive

behavior, the author demonstrates that time and again the reaction of fans, the spin by media, the responses by regulatory bodies and management, and even the presumption of innocence all break along racial lines.

Leonard contends that similarly, when it comes to athletic prowess and success, the narratives differ significantly depending on the athlete’s race. From *The Bleacher Report* to the *New York Times*, he shows how black athletes typically are celebrated for their natural athletic ability, while white athletes are praised for their intelligence and work ethic.

He also shines a light on research that indexes the adjectives used in scouting reports from CBS, ESPN and the NFL — providing

quantitative proof of the racial stereotyping that underpins sports culture.

This book reveals the way white privilege operates by focusing on the cheating and sometimes criminal misbehaviors of white-skinned star athletes such as Tom Brady, Ryan Lochte, Hope Solo, Lance Armstrong and others. These case studies are not comprehensive, but they do suggest at the very least an ingrained and habitual extension of leniency that is denied to those with darker skin.

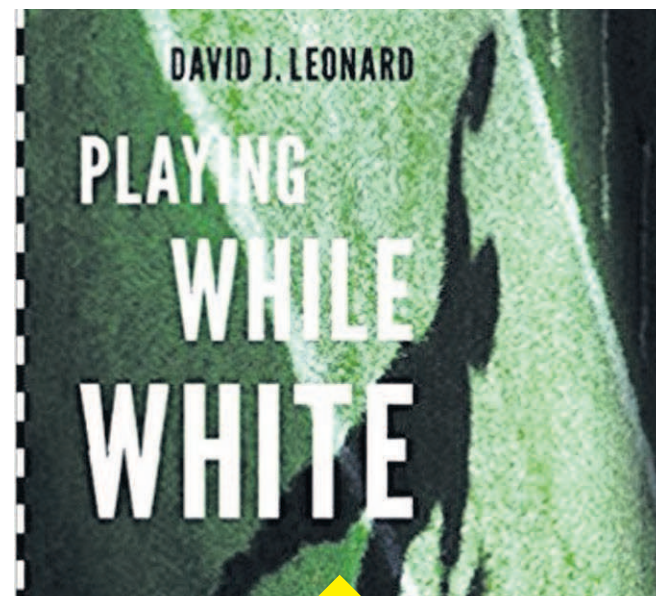
Leonard sometimes regurgitates the same observations from one chapter to the next. His writing style is a fast-paced salmagundi of academic jargon, “isms” (racism, sexism, exceptionalism, consumerism), and hash tags (#PlayingWhileWhite, #FanWhileWhite, #OwningWhileWhite, #DroptheSlur, and many, many more).

A sharper-eyed copyeditor might have assisted overall reading comprehension with closer attention to use of commas and the reining in of run-on sentences.

But putting those criticisms aside — in the aftermath of Charlottesville, this is still a worthwhile read. For white people who don’t understand what all the fuss is about, “Playing While White” irrefutably shows how racial inequity is practiced and even promoted in America’s sports culture.

Perhaps by considering these issues through the lens of sports — which is, after all, “re-creation” — we might become better attuned to recognizing the institutionalized racism that still pervades our society.

*The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at [bkmonger@nwlinc.com](mailto:bkmonger@nwlinc.com).*



**“Playing While White”**  
By David J. Leonard  
UW Press  
320 pp  
\$26.95

Crossword Answer

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