

The Everyday Activism of Chicago’s Public High-School Football Coaches

Lawrence Johnson

For several generations, high-school football programs have been an important part of the social fabric in economically challenged Chicago neighborhoods. Sociologist Lawrence Johnson, himself a former player in the Chicago Public League, draws on in-depth interviews with coaches and players to conclude that policies being pursued by city officials in the name of educational choice and reform are ripping this fabric apart.

A tearing social fabric

Ebony Magazine published an article in 1963 titled “Four Against the Odds: Coaching Brothers Overcome Slum Disadvantages.” The four Bonner brothers featured, especially Carl and Bob, dedicated their lives to helping students in Chicago’s public high schools on the already ghettoized South Side. Glenn Johnson, decorated Dunbar High School (HS) coach, was a student at DuSable HS in the 1950s when Bob Bonner was the assistant coach. Johnson remembers Bonner as the main influence among the players on his all-black team, with the white head coach as a mere figurehead. Carl Bonner became the first black head coach in 1960, when he began his 42-year tenure at his *alma mater*, Wendell Phillips HS. The coaches who followed recount how the Bonner brothers were instrumental in helping them seek resources, run practices, and network with other coaches, constructing fraternal bonds and building a network within the Public League, as the public high-school football teams were known.

Figure 1. Coaches Roy Curry (Robeson High School), Glenn Johnson (Dunbar High School), and Lonnie Williams (King High School)



Source: Glenn Johnson.

As a former Public League football player and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) graduate, I went back to talk to some of the coaches and students in 2016. Using personal contacts, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with retired, semi-retired, and active coaches. I focused on the South Side, where the football tradition is most established and where the foundational generation of coaches' careers spanned the 34 to 50 years from when many were students in CPS during the 1950s demographic shift. This generation of coaches started or took over programs during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, using their positions to support the difficult needs of their students and players, in a school district beset by racial and economic inequality. These coaches' careers are a part of the social fabric of the city.¹

I found, however, that this fabric was in the process of being ripped apart. The education policies of current mayor Rahm Emanuel and his predecessor Richard M. Daley are part of this. Since the turn of the 21st century, the destabilization of neighborhood schools—through policies that have shut many of them down and replaced them with charter and turnaround schools—has contributed to the displacement of thousands of Chicagoans from the predominantly Black South Side and Black and Latino West Side (Lipman 2013).

In embracing neoliberal school reform (pushing for the closure of neighborhood schools, for the undermining and displacement of unionized teachers, and for relentless testing), Chicago officials ignore the social benefits that community-based high schools provide in the city's historically segregated Black neighborhoods. Even when the schools are doing poorly academically, they are important community anchors and have been for 50 years. When people who write about neoliberalism talk about uprooting existing institutions, they often think about public services in the abstract (Harvey 2007; Giroux 2008). But in Chicago, an important institution, especially for young Black men, is the high-school football team, led by a coach with roots not just in the neighborhood but in a whole network of longtime football coaches. This paper discusses the development of this network, argues for its importance, and shows that particular reforms—school closures, turnaround schools, charter schools, etc.—prevent the renewal of these networks by making the employment of these coaches more precarious. The reforms do little to nothing for education and destroy significant neighborhood social assets.

Networks beyond football

In the 1960s and 1970s, the lack of resources for sports programs often meant that coaches organized fundraisers and paid expenses out of pocket. Greg Brooks, the longtime Fenger High coach, began his CPS career with Roy Curry at Robeson High School. As the freshman coach, Brooks did not have enough football equipment for all of his players. Like most coaches who refused to turn away students, he found ways to alternate activities and practices to retain as many players as possible. When Terry Lewis began his tenure at Harper HS, he relied on the support of other coaches, borrowing equipment and supplies, when he could no longer afford to use his own salary. After four years, he and the principal received a sponsorship from the Sara Lee Corporation, which put Lewis in a better position to support fellow coaches. He declares: "From that point on, I loaned money!"

The coaches experienced the declining support and cooperation of the community as poverty deepened and many Black families moved to the suburbs or other areas. Schools often lacked adequate practice facilities and coaches depended on neighborhood parks, which also meant cooperation with local gangs. Coach Lonnie Williams, who coached for 50 years at Martin Luther King HS, reported that a group of gang leaders in the neighborhood told him, "We respect what

¹ Of the 20 head coaches interviewed, 17 are black and three are white. Two coaches identified as Mexican American could not be reached. Twelve of the coaches were over the age of 60. All but four are originally from Chicago. Although I was familiar with most of the coaches, the only coach with whom I have a personal relationship is my former coach Peter Thanos, who coached me from 1995 through 1998, and like most of my former teammates we have maintained adult relationships decades later.

you've done with your boys all these years and we made sure no one ever messed with them.” Simeon HS coach Al Scott found creative ways to keep his players safe from gangs,² including disguising himself as destitute on the corner to monitor his players in the neighborhood. Coaches often got involved in more personal matters, loaning their players money, assisting with living arrangements, attending court, and providing transportation. These were the requisite commitments for maintaining football programs when their existence was tenuous.

Figure 2. Alvin Scott coaching at Simeon High School in the 1970s



Source: PRWeb (www.prweb.com/releases/2013/6/prweb10884272.htm).

More than football

When a Public League team is victorious against a suburban or Catholic league team, it is a win for the entire league. It is a testament to the beliefs, values, and philosophies of the coaches that convinces players that success on the field can translate to others aspects of the players' lives, without minimizing the inequality that they experience. Other leagues often have decided advantages: larger coaching staffs, updated equipment, large rosters, and the absence of negative stigma, which is believed to have an effect on the way the games are officiated. One coach articulated a sentiment that characterizes the perspective of most coaches: “We don't teach from a textbook, we teach from life and the game is our test.” One coach explained the difference between himself and the coach of the Catholic League's Mount Carmel, a South Side program with national recognition. He states: “Lenti has a playbook that [park] district coaches teach their players long before they get to Carmel [...] and he has a staff that's able to drill it into their heads over and over again.” In contrast, he states, “I have a playbook too, but more important I know how to innovate. When I get a guy as a freshman or sophomore, and it's the first time he puts on pads, I know I am working against the clock to give him what he needs; most of the time, it's love.”

The most meaningful outcomes consist not in wins and losses but in how the coaches evaluate their players' ability to overcome adverse situations and mold them to their advantage. Victories that overcome great odds become part of Public League lore when programs that are less equipped occasionally defeat the state's best competition. Roy Curry at Robeson HS is well regarded for his

² See: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-10-06/sports/9510060138_1_gang-members-coaching-milestone-watchful.

ability to prepare his teams, seemingly overmatched, to register improbable victories.³ When asked about his success, Curry answers modestly: “No one is going to outwork us.” However, a closer examination reveals a culture in which coaches impart life philosophies for success on the field and help players navigate transitions from high school to their adult lives. This is best represented by former players who return to follow in the footsteps of their former coaches, such as Maris Carroll at Harper and Fabray Collins at Robeson.

Figure 3. Mural featuring Coaches Roy Curry and George Pruitt in the Curry–Pruitt Athletic Center at Paul Robeson High School, Englewood, Chicago



Source: Lawrence Johnson.

Terry Jones, a Robeson player from 1989 to 1992, has a master’s degree in business administration (MBA) but left his previous job to become a head coach at Calumet Perspectives Charter High School. Jones’s career change is inspired by his great fortune of surviving violent deaths three times in his life, twice in his youth; he is now committed to instilling the values of “faith, family, and football.” One of Jones’s players commented: “Sometimes I think he has more confidence in me than I have in myself. He sees potential in everyone.”⁴ The values of coaching that Jones learned come from several of his own coaches and reveal a network in which many hall-of-fame coaches in the Illinois High School Sports Association have former players running programs throughout the city.

Despite this tradition, within the past decade several hall-of-fame coaches had their tenures ended with unceremonious replacements in a school system that treats teachers as expendable. The restructuring of the Chicago Public Schools makes it hard to imagine that many of the younger

³ See: www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/blood-sweat-and-cheers/Content?oid=901960.

⁴ Source: www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20130816/auburn-gresham/perspectives-football-coach-overcomes-shootings-stabbing-lead-team.

generation coaches will enjoy long tenures at any one school, stability being one of the factors that allows long-term success. David Hursh (2015) believes this transition to be the end of public education. Many of the younger coaches are less likely to be full-time employees, teachers and administrators. They are more likely to have auxiliary positions or to be employed outside of the school, which reduces the capacity of the relationships that allowed the coaches to be innovative in the past.

Paradoxical achievements

For most of the 20th century, the greatest sporting event in the Chicagoland area was the annual Prep Bowl, which pitted the Public League Champions against the Chicago Catholic League Champions. Up until the 1950s, the event was significant in the acculturation of White ethnics, representing the Catholic League, against the Americanized Public League (Gems 1996); the out-migration of Whites from the city to the suburbs transformed inter-ethnic and inter-class competitions to racialized events when neighborhoods and public schools became predominantly Black in the 1960s. In 1976, Coach John Potocki and Chicago Vocational HS broke the Catholic League's winning streak, which had dated to 1959.⁵ It was arguably the greatest victory of the Black Public League, but it occurred two years after the creation of the Illinois State High-School Playoffs, which eclipsed the tradition of the Prep Bowl. Until recently, the Public League had only had one appearance in a state championship game, Robeson HS in 1982.

In 2015, Wendell Phillips HS celebrated the Public League's first state championship as the second CPS team to appear in the game. The victory was a triumph for generations of coaches, players, and community members. Phillips HS repeated the feat in 2017, winning their second championship in three years. However, the victory is bittersweet when we consider the private interests decimating schools and neighborhoods; the only way the football program could be supported was for the school to yield to the neoliberal model.

Phillips is the South Side's oldest high school and its first predominantly Black one; it is also a "turnaround school" in the historic and gentrifying area of Bronzeville. It was taken over in 2010 by the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), whose patronage includes banks, corporations, and foundations, in addition to CPS funding. In 2010, most of the school's staff and teachers were released and replaced with the AUSL's own cadre. The turnaround is supported by the political clout of AUSL's venture-capitalist founder. Phillips is touted as a "miracle story" in local and national media for its football success, powerful stories that eclipse the displacement of students all over the city and the closure of many neighborhood schools.⁶

What, then, defines success? All the coaches I interviewed gave slightly different answers that had less to do with the outcomes of games and more to do with developing character and their players' futures. Imparting the wisdom of my own coach, one coach stressed the importance of playing with class, "because how you play the game predicts what type of future you're going to have." When I met with coaches at their schools, in several cases I witnessed large buildings operating at limited capacities,⁷ sometimes with entire floors shut down. Coaches expressed a

⁵ One understands the significance of the game when one hears the former players discuss the game over 40 years later. Players, now nearly 60 years old, got together with Potocki for dinner in 2015. One former player came from as far as Texas to support his coach, who was going through a difficult time in his life. Potocki, one of the few white coaches interviewed, and one of the few coaching on the South Side after the shift, was as beloved by his players as any of the black coaches; players regarded him as a father figure.

⁶ For an example of national coverage, see: <http://usatodayhss.com/2016/chicago-football-programs-using-gofundme-to-help-field-teams>. As a coach at an AUSL school, Phillips is able to recruit players from its feeder schools and their sports programs, while CPS has eliminated youth development programs that contributed to the success of some CPS teams.

⁷ See: www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-chicago-public-schools-high-schools-low-enrollment-met-20151102-story.html.

variety of perspectives on how the city's and CPS's disinvestment are failing students, emphasizing that current strategies are diametrically opposed to policies that allowed them to succeed for decades. Coaches were most successful when they had cooperative relationships with principals, teachers, and staff who recognized that sports and other activities were not simply extracurricular activities but an essential part of the school's programs—programs they viewed as opportunities to put students on the right path.

I also observed what is remarkable about the Public League when I interviewed Coach Maris Carroll at Harper HS on a summer day before he began practice. As I write, Harper HS in Englewood, with fewer than 200 students enrolled, is scheduled to be closed at the end of the 2017/2018 school year.⁸ I asked Carroll how many players he had; he said 18 and whatever freshmen he might get. Perhaps he sensed my doubt, but he modeled confidence when he said, "But they'll be ready." Carroll introduced me to several of the players who had walked through West Englewood to come to school that day and when I shook their hands I recognized the same pride that was instilled in myself, former teammates, and countless other young Black men dating back to the 1960s.

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⁸ See: www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-met-chicago-schools-charter-closing-1201-story.html.