Understanding Jim Brown

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Edu P&L 834
My first understanding of Jim Brown was early in my life. To be honest, Jim Brown was the first professional athlete that I had ever known. My father had played basketball and lacrosse against Jim Brown in college at Syracuse when my father was at nearby Cortland. Consequently any athlete that my brothers and I began to admire was compared to my father’s model of athletic excellence, Jim Brown. So while we knew there was a Jim Brown because of the accounts my father shared with us, which seemed more like tall tales, there was a slight belief that Jim Brown was a good friend of Paul Bunyan and helped Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny sneak around all the while riding a unicorn.

My father told us how Jim Brown never, ever voluntarily ran off the field to avoid being tackled while playing football. My father told us how he once in a basketball game elbowed Jim Brown in the nose. Upon seeing this, a teammate of my father’s said, “Do you know who that is? That’s Jim Brown!” The next time down the floor Jim Brown’s elbow treated my father’s jaw like a boxing speed bag. My father also told us how at halftime of their lacrosse game, Jim Brown went up to the track and ran the 400 and 800 meters for the track team. And then there were the general recollections that, “No one could run like Jim Brown.”

Imagine trying to hold one’s childhood hero’s in comparison to your father’s hero, whom he actually played against. My brothers and I had no leg on which to stand. But as we grew older our feelings of frustration towards what seemed like our father’s stubbornness to relent on the superiority of his hero turned to feelings of amazement and disbelief. The stories which he told us that seemed like tall tales were true, all of them. Our father was right. But we also found out that Jim Brown was not just one of the best, if not the greatest athlete of all time. He was also one of our country’s most groundbreaking, influential, and controversial citizens.
To begin to understand Jim Brown one must know the story of his life. Born on February 17, 1936, James Nathaniel Brown was born to Theresa and Swinton Brown on St. Simons Island off the coast of the state of Georgia (Wikipedia, 2008). Shortly after Jim’s birth, Swinton, a professional boxer, abandoned Jim and his mother (Schwartz, 2007). When Jim was 2 his mother Theresa left for Long Island, NY, where she had taken a job as a house maid. He stayed on St. Simons Island where he was raised by his great-grandmother and his alcoholic grandmother (2007). Raised in a home where the toilet was the backyard and the school house was a segregated two-room shack, Brown speaks fondly of the early years of his life, as if St. Simons Island showed him the difference between wants and needs.

“When I was growing up in Georgia, I guess we were supposed to be poor….but we weren’t poor. We had all the crab and fish and vegetables that we could eat. The house was so small and weather-beaten, but I lived well. Because there was so much family there, a whole community of people who cared about each other. See, that was my foundation. I’d hate to have to come up without that” (Rushin, 1994).

After 6 years without even seeing his mother, she finally sent for him at the age of 8 and it was off to Long Island (Wikipedia, 2008).

On Long Island, Jim and his mother lived in an affluent white neighborhood called Manhasset. He attended Manhasset high school where he excelled in 5 different sports (football, basketball, track, lacrosse, and baseball) and earned 13 varsity letters (Wikipedia, 2008)). Even as his exploits as an athlete garnered plenty of attention, Brown credits the success of his life to a group of white professional men that pushed him to study, work hard, and excel.
“Without Manhasset, without Dr. Collins and Ken Malloy and Mr. Dawson and Ed Walsh, it would’ve been impossible...these people actually saved my life. I would never, ever have been anything without them. And it was so pure. If kids can see honesty and interest from people of that age, that's what builds...I've got an example for the rest of my life. You wanna see what goodness is? I look at those people. I know what love is. I know what patience is. I know what consistency is. I know what honesty is” (Rushin, 1994).

It was also these men that mentored Jim to continue his education at Syracuse University. Brown began his freshman year at Syracuse in 1953, the summer before the verdict of Brown vs. Board of Education (Rushin, 1994). His freshman year at Syracuse was met with a dismal 5th string place on the running back depth chart for the football team (1994). But more significantly, Brown was met with his first personal dose of discrimination. He and other black football players stayed in a different dorm than the rest of the team and were required to eat on a meal plan different from the other football players (1994). One could speculate but it would be easy to assume that from this point forth, Brown’s eyes were open and his senses were heightened to the societal, institutional, and athletic inequities as a result of racial discrimination.

“I came up at the crossroads of segregation...there were still colleges where black players couldn’t play. There were teams that would go south and black players had to stay in private homes. These were very difficult times. It was a blessing on the one hand because there were opportunities, but it was demeaning because you were still looked on as inferior. It was almost as if you’d been given a favor. And you always felt you had to perform much, much better” (Rushin, 1994).
Performing much, much better was Brown’s forte all the way up to his graduation from Syracuse in 1957. He had earned letters in Football, Basketball, Lacrosse and Track. He had earned All-American status in both Football and Lacrosse (Schwartz, 2007). And when he was drafted by the Cleveland Browns of the National Football League, he was also drafted by the Syracuse Nationals of the National Basketball Association even though his junior season at Syracuse was the last time he had played basketball (2007). Sports Illustrated rated Brown’s senior year at Syracuse the 4th Most Impressive College Sporting Feats Ever, the entry reads:

Still, to this day, he is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest lacrosse players the game has ever seen.

Brown’s professional football career as the star running back of the Cleveland Browns spanned from 1957 to 1965 (Schwartz, 2007). In his nine seasons with the Browns he led the league in rushing eight times, he had seven seasons of 1,000 yards or more, he averaged over 100 yards rushing for his career, and did all of this while never missing a game (2007). One Pulitzer Prize winning columnist described Brown’s football playing style as such: “For mercurial speed, airy nimbleness, and explosive violence in one package of undistilled evil, there is no other like Mr. Brown” (Schwartz, 2007).

Even as he enjoyed professional success and notoriety Brown’s experiences at Syracuse had left their mark. Brown saw evidence of the same kinds of discrimination at the professional level as he had experienced in college. He could not ignore it.

“But you could never just play and not be cognizant of the social situation in the country…Every day of your life, that was in your mind. You had to question why they only put black players at certain positions, why there were positions that blacks weren’t smart enough to play. They had a whole bunch of rules. You always had an even number of blacks on the team so they could room with each other. You always had six or eight. You couldn’t have five” (Rushin, 1994).
Although Brown was aware of inequalities on his very own team, he also knew that his notoriety and station as one of the premier athletes in the country allowed him a platform from which to be an agent of change. “…I was very conscious of the civil-rights movement…and very active in what I call the movement for dignity, equality, and justice. In fact, it superseded my interest in sports. Sports gave me an opportunity to help the cause. And so I did that” (Rushin, 1994).

So Brown began advising his fellow black teammates on such things as personal finances, appearance and etiquette, and reminded them that they were the only ones that could control their dignity. He began to spend more time in the inner city of Cleveland and inner city Philadelphia with Muhammad Ali (Rushin, 1994). Brown wanted to give the same message that he spread with his teammates to as many African Americans as he could.

And then another avenue opened.

After making a couple of cameo appearances in a few small films, Brown was cast in the 1967 movie *The Dirty Dozen* (Wikipedia, 2008). It was while on the set in Europe during the summer of 1967 that Brown shocked the athletic world and announced his retirement from the Cleveland Browns (2008). While Brown went on to act in many films he featured in the movie *…tick…tick…tick…*, and played a major role in the hit movie *Ice Station Zebra* (Yaeger, 2002). However his biggest moment came in the movie *100 Rifles* with Burt Reynolds and Raquel Welch in which Brown and Welch engaged in Hollywood’s first major interracial love scene (2002).
And while he had forever turned his back on a return to football he never forgot the social obligation to which he had endeared himself. Towards the end of the 1960’s Brown received more than one million dollars from the Ford Foundation and began what came to be known as the Black Economic Union (BEU)(Rushin, 1994). The BEU was formed to help cultivate African American entrepreneurship with the assistance of athletes and business professionals. It is said that the BEU influenced over 400 businesses (1994). Since then Brown has also founded his Amer-I-Can program. Through Amer-I-Can Brown works with inner city kids, gang members, and prisons to assist at risk and incarcerated youth and adults with gaining life management skills (Wikipedia, 2008).
But there is another side to Brown. One not as laudatory as the great athlete, the groundbreaking actor, and the social activist. Since his days as a Cleveland Brown, Brown has had a history of violent behavior towards women. Not all of his accusations have led to convictions but Brown, himself, recognizes that he does not always make the best choices with women (Rushin, 1994). He has spent time in prison for his own choices but he acknowledges that even he is still a work in progress:

“I can definitely get angry, and I have taken anger out inappropriately in the past. But I have done so with both men and women. So do I have a problem with women? No. I have had anger and I’ll probably continue to have anger. I just have to not strike out at anyone ever again. I have to be smarter than I was. What I would say is that with wisdom, I will only use my mentality or my spirit aggressively. I will never use my hands that way again” (Yaeger, 2002).

Assorted books, articles, and commentaries have been written, documentaries and interviews have been recorded, and many opinions have been formed on the life and times of Jim Brown. It is the hope of this unit that one can come to as rich an understanding as possible of one of the most revered, unique, feared, condemned, and celebrated individuals of the past century.
Works Cited


Can you understand Jim Brown?

**Activities**

On the following pages are a series of activities that will allow for a more critical exploration into important parts of the life and times of Jim Brown.
Can you understand why Jim Brown is considered to be one of the best if not the greatest athlete of all-time???

- Ranked #4 on ESPN Sportscenury’s list of 100 Greatest Athletes
- The only player to ever inducted to the National Football Hall of Fame, the College Football Hall of Fame, and the Lacrosse Hall of Fame
- He was named All-American in both Football and Lacrosse at Syracuse University
- He lettered in Football, Basketball, Lacrosse, and Track at Syracuse University
- He earned 13 letters in Football, Basketball, Lacrosse, Track and Baseball at Manhasset High School
- He was drafted by the Cleveland Browns (NFL), the Syracuse Nationals (NBA) and received a letter of interest from Casey Stengel, manager, New York Yankees.

(Activity)

Open the hyperlink and look through ESPN Sportscenury’s 100 Greatest Athletes

http://espn.go.com/sportscenury/athletes.html

Scan the list and see how many of the athletes that you know or recognize. How many of the top 100 are African American Athletes?

(Schwartz, 2007)
Can you understand why he is believed to be one of the best if not the best football player in the history of the National Football League?

- 12,312 career yards
- 126 career touchdowns, 106 of which were rushing touchdowns
- Averaged 104 yards per game, 5.2 yards a carry
- Ran for at least 100 yards in 58 of his 118 games
- 7 Seasons with more than 1,000 yards rushing, 1,863 was his highest.
- Named NFL Rookie of the Year in 1957 when he lead all running backs in yards with 942.
- Twice named NFL Most Valuable Player
- Won the NFL Championship in 1963, he ran for 114 yards in the title game
- Never missed a Game, never missed a practice

(Schwartz, 2007)

**Activity**

Open the hyperlink below and read the account of how two of football’s fiercest tacklers inflicted their heaviest punishment on Jim Brown….and who survived.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FIH/is_9_74/ai_n17209218/?tag=mantle_skin;content

Jim Brown played 9 seasons. Critics claim that his career was a short one. After reading the gruesome nature of this account, what are your feelings on the longevity of pro football athletes? Was Jim Brown’s career too brief?
Can you understand why Jim Brown is not happy with today’s Professional Athletes?

**Activity**

Open the hyperlink below and scroll down to watch two segments of the interview with Jim Brown.

First, watch the segment titled “Brown on the NFL Today”

Secondly, watch the segment titled “Brown on Activism and Priorities”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/graham-bensinger/jim-brown-on-barack-obama_b_146086.html

1. Google the movie “Birth of a Nation”. Read two entries that provide a description or historical narrative of this movie.

2. Try and make a case both for/against Brown’s contention that African American’s have fought so hard to eliminate the stereotypes promoted in “Birth of a Nation” yet the behavior of today’s African American athletes seems to be promoting the same stereotypes.
Can you understand why Jim Brown is not to be understood only by his football career?

Activity

Open the hyperlink below and scroll down to watch the segment titled “Brown on Racism” of the interview with Jim Brown.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/graham-bensinger/jim-brown-on-barack-obama_b_146086.html

Look at the picture to the right.

Who are they?

For what purpose are they gathered?

How many of these men are athletes?

How many of these men are activists?

Refer to:

http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/97580876
Can you understand why Jim Brown was known for breaking down race barriers in Hollywood?

**Activity**

Open the hyperlink below and scroll down to watch the segment titled “Brown on His Acting Career” of the interview with Jim Brown.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/graham-bensinger/jim-brown-on-barack-obama_b_146086.html

1. Make a list of all the African-American film stars that you can think of who were cast in movies before Jim Brown’s breakthrough performance in 1967 in *The Dirty Dozen*.

2. Make a list of all the African-American film stars that you can think of who were cast in movies since Jim Brown’s breakthrough performance in 1967 in *The Dirty Dozen*. 
Can you understand why Jim Brown is regarded as a criminal by some people?

Below is an excerpt form the article entitled “Prisoner of Conscience” by Don Yaeger. It was published first in *Sports Illustrated* on April 15, 2002.

Despite all his laudable work in recent years trying to reform gang members and curb inner-city violence, Brown has always seemed threatening to some Americans. He has only bolstered that image with recurring displays of anger, especially against women. Brown was fined $500 and briefly jailed for beating up a male golf partner in 1978, and he has faced assault charges against women five times over the last four decades; in the first four cases the charges were either dropped or he was acquitted after his female accusers decided not to testify against him.

It was on March 12, as a result of his latest such episode, that Brown entered the Ventura County (Calif.) Jail to serve a 180-day sentence for misdemeanor vandalism with domestic-violence conditions. Brown, 66, was arrested in June 1999 after his wife, Monique, then 25, called 911 from a neighbor's house in Hollywood Hills to report that her husband had smashed the windows of her car with a shovel after arguing with her. Though a jury acquitted Brown on the more serious charge of making a terrorist threat against his wife—Monique told the 911 operator that Jim had threatened to kill her, a claim she later retracted—it convicted him of vandalism, and Los Angeles Superior Court judge Dale Fischer fined him $1,800 and sentenced him to three years' probation, a year of domestic-violence counseling and his choice of 40 hours on a work crew or 400 hours of community service. When Brown refused to accept the counseling, Fischer imposed the jail sentence. Brown appealed—arguing that he had not committed an act of domestic violence and that Fischer had been biased against him—and lost.
Can you understand why Jim Brown is regarded as a criminal by some people? Cont.

Just days after he began serving time, a new 130-minute documentary about his life, by director Spike Lee, opened for a brief run in New York City. The film, entitled Jim Brown: All-American, will play in Los Angeles in mid-April and then be re-edited and shortened for airing on HBO in December. "Jim Brown is a complex and misunderstood man, and that's the type of person I like to make films about," says Lee. For the film, a wide-ranging examination of Brown's life, Lee chased down the central figure in one of the more celebrated events in Brown's past, former girlfriend Eva Bohn-Chin, a model whom Brown was long alleged to have pushed off a second-floor balcony during an argument in 1968. Brown claims the story is untrue and has said Bohn-Chin jumped from the balcony. In the documentary Bohn-Chin never says exactly what did happen, but she asks, "Why would I jump?"

The entire article can be found at:

Activity

Please take a moment to write a 1 page reflection of your feelings regarding Jim Brown up to this point. Does this account of Brown's criminal history tainted your feelings? How so? And to what extent? Is he a role model?
Can you understand what is important to Jim Brown?

*Activity*

Open the hyperlink below and scroll down to watch the segment titled “Brown on His Legacy” of the interview with Jim Brown.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/graham-bensinger/jim-brown-on-barack-obama_b_146086.html

It is often said that “The best things in life aren’t things.”

1. With this said, what things are important to you? Make a list of 10 things.

2. At the end of your life what do you hope to leave as your legacy?

3. Are any of those things different or similar to Jim Brown’s?
Do you understand Jim Brown?

Hopefully the activities contained in this unit have provided thought provoking ideas not only regarding Jim Brown but also related to professional athletics, civil rights, African Americans in films, and a history of athletes as activists to name a few.

This unit has been primarily constructed for individuals to work their way through each slide to develop a deeper understanding of the life and times of Jim Brown. However, I have created this unit in such a way that teachers may present their students with the links and information on each slide. After the students have viewed or read the material, teachers may use the activities on each slide as an assignment or to provoke a meaningful class discussion.

While I have tried not to share my own feelings regarding Jim Brown, I do apologize if any of the narratives have created any kind of bent one way or the other. I was only trying to create a range of emotions that I have experienced and noticed when thinking and speaking to others concerning the life and times of Jim Brown.
Bibliography

Books

Films
In 2002, film director Spike Lee released the film *Jim Brown: All-American; a retrospective* on Brown's professional

Films in which Jim Brown has acted
http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/contributor/1800010476/filmography

Articles and other Multimedia (these are a few from an almost infinite number)