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Sport and Stigma: College Football Recruiting and Institutional Identity of Ole Miss

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The identity and history of the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) has been the subject of immense political discussion and popular debate. Using a conceptual and analytical framework guided by stigma and stigma management, this study examines the debate through the lens of football recruiting at Ole Miss. Qualitative interviews with prominent football players and program administrators (i.e. coaches, recruiters) at Ole Miss, as well as prominent football players at Mississippi State University, highlight a number of negative recruiting strategies used by coaches from competing schools to portray Ole Miss in an unfavorable light when interacting with prospective student-athletes. In turn, those associated with the Ole Miss Rebel football program enlist a number of tactics designed to manage the stigmatized identity of Ole Miss. This paper underscores the need to address ways sports practices intersect with educational institutions, as well as the need to examine stigma at both the structural (institutional) and situational (interpersonal) levels.

KEYWORDS: *Football, Negative Recruiting, Ole Miss, Stigma*

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

- William Faulkner

The identity and history of the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) has been the subject of immense political discussion and popular debate in recent years. Despite recent national attention to the University of Mississippi (i.e., host of the first 2008 Presidential debate), and its association with well-known sporting icons (i.e., quarterbacks Archie and Eli Manning), reports have indicated that the university’s persistence in displaying symbols of white supremacy have made it extremely difficult for Ole Miss to attract top black athletes (Cohodas, 1997a; Feldman, 2007; Ole Miss Refuses to Denounce the Symbols of Slavery and Jim Crow, 1998). In other words, the symbolic association of Southern traditions with the University of Mississippi, as well as images of the integration of Ole Miss by James Meredith in 1962¹, have made it difficult for the Ole Miss Rebel football program to overcome the negative stigma associated with Ole Miss as a place where race has been and continues to be a problem (Feldman, 2007).

The University of Mississippi, commonly referred to as Ole Miss, is located in Oxford, Mississippi. While Oxford is home to southern writers like William Faulkner and John Grisham who have helped shape many people’s perceptions of the South, others argue that the University of Mississippi has sought to secure its place as a bastion of the Old South through its use of Confederate symbols (Cohodas, 1997b; King & Springwood, 2001; Lederman, 1993; Ole Miss Refuses to Denounce the Symbols of Slavery and Jim Crow, 1998; Newman, 2007). Symbols identified as holding Ole Miss back, both academically and athletically, are the name “Ole Miss,” a Confederate soldier near the entrance of campus, the Lyceum which was the central building for conflict during the Meredith riots, a cemetery for Confederate soldiers near Tad Smith Coliseum, street names like Confederate Drive and Lee Loop, the nickname of the sports teams - The Rebels - the “Colonel Rebel” mascot, fans’ use of the Confederate battle flag at football games, and the band’s performance of the song “Dixie” (Lederman, 1993) – “a slave song co-opted by White entrepreneurs and incorporated into the blackface minstrels of the late 19th century” (Newman, 2007, p. 319). Of all the symbols, those associated with the university’s sports teams – the “Colonel Rebel” mascot, the Confederate battle flag, and “Dixie” – receive the most attention.² Each decade starting with the 1980s observed an institutional change or compromise regarding one of these three symbols in hope of presenting a more positive image of the university (Lederman, 1993).³

¹ During the Meredith riots, two people died, and 166 federal marshals and 40 soldiers were injured by the time President Kennedy sent 30,000 troops to quash the violence (Feldman, 2007).

² The confederate flag and “Dixie” arrived in 1948 as a result of student participation in the Dixiecrat political convention which was dedicated to fighting desegregation (Lederman, 1993). Soon after the convention, it is argued that the symbols were adopted by the university as a gesture of white supremacy. In 1929, the university’s sports teams were known as the “Mississippi Flood” (Khayat 2003). The change to Rebels occurred in 1936, but the on-field mascot, an old man in baggy pants, did not appear until 1979 following a national trend towards Disney-like characters.

³ In the 1980s, “Dixie” became one of several songs in the medley “From Dixie with Love” which also includes the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” indicating several factors at play during the Civil War. A “stick rule” was introduced in the 1990s as a way to disassociate the Confederate flag with sporting events. In addition, a new flag, the Battle “M” flag was introduced. The most recent mascot, which was banned from the sidelines of sporting events in 2003, no longer wore the plantation suit of the Southern gentleman but the appropriate sporting uniform given the season.

Sport, as an institution, has been viewed as a vehicle for displaying many forms of identity that often serve to reproduce inequalities in our society (Back, Crabbe, & Solomon, 1999; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; King & Springwood, 2001; Long & Hylton, 2002; Newman, 2007). At no time is this more apparent than through the racialized discourse that erupts when coaches recruit prospective student-athletes for the University of Mississippi's football program. Conversations with athletic administrators at Ole Miss reveal it is not uncommon for prospective student-athletes outside of Mississippi who are being recruited by Ole Miss to receive packets filled with news clippings of racism in Mississippi, as well as occurrences at Ole Miss. In addition to news articles outlining the racial hostility in the state and at the university, articles outlining the Confederate symbols associated the university have been sent to prospective student-athletes. The most recent takes the form of a welcome letter from "The Rebel Faithful," a letter sent to student-athletes who have made verbal commitments to Ole Miss (see Appendix A). The letter displays the Confederate battle flag in the upper left corner and introduces prospects to "the Best Ole Miss Traditions" by highlighting negative features associated with the university and the football program (i.e., meaning of "Ole Miss," use or display of Confederate symbols, white leadership versus black athletic performance on the field and in the classroom, derogatory language – "boy" and "some types of people"). This negative letter, postmarked in Memphis, Tennessee and believed to be from a rival fan(s) given the slight inaccuracies in the traditional "Hotty Toddy" cheer⁴, was the stimulus for the present study.

Given the foregoing discussion, this investigation attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) How is Ole Miss portrayed by individuals (e.g., coaches, fans, alumni) associated with competing football programs during recruiting season when interacting with prospective student-athletes? (2) When a negative identity is activated, how do those associated with the Ole Miss Rebel football program manage the stigmatized identity when interacting with prospective student-athletes? To answer the proposed research questions, I use a conceptual and analytical framework guided by stigma and stigma management to explore the way(s) the institutional identity of Ole Miss is being presented by both negative recruiters and those associated with Ole Miss. Stigma analysis allows me to investigate the influence of identity politics on student-athletes' decisions concerning school choice. Building on this insight, the remainder of the study is organized as follows. First, I will review the literature on student-athletes' decisions concerning school choice and athletic recruiting. Second, I will explicate the theoretical framework guided by the concepts of stigma and stigma management which serve as a guide for this investigation. Third, an empirical exploration of these issues is designed and executed using qualitative interviews with prominent football players and administrators at the University of Mississippi, along with prominent football players at Mississippi State University who were also recruited by Ole Miss. Findings are then discussed in light of stigma as it pertains to the institutional identity of Ole Miss, as well as various management strategies employed by those associated with Ole Miss as they deal with the consequences of stigmatization. Finally, I discuss the implications of these results and outline several directions for future research.

Student-Athletes: School Choice Decisions

A majority of research conducted in the area of athletic recruiting has focused on the importance of attributes used by prospective student-athletes when deciding where to attend

⁴ Hotty Toddy, Gosh Almighty, Who the Hell Are We? Hey! Flim, Flam, Bim, Bam, Ole Miss by Damn!

college (Cooper, 1996; Doyle & Gaeth, 1990). Division I baseball and softball recruits indicated the following five attributes as most important to them in terms of school choice: (1) scholarship amount, (2) team reputation, (3) atmosphere, (4) school location, and (5) academic programs (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990). Similarly, basketball recruits ranked the importance of forty variables when making decisions concerning school choice (Cooper, 1996). Among the most important attributes were relationships between players and coaches, coaches' commitment to the program, and the particular style of play adopted by the team.

While identifying attributes is useful for understanding decisions made by student-athletes when making decisions about where to attend college, this does not tell us why these particular attributes are important nor does it provide any insight into the recruiting process. In an attempt to fill this gap, Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman (2001) interviewed twenty-seven NCAA Division I football players asking why such attributes were important to them in terms of school choice. By employing a means-end approach, they were able to link attributes, consequences (including benefits), and values with overall school choice decisions. While we learn more about the reasons behind school choice for football players, we still know very little about the recruiting process or American college football recruiting in particular, as well as the impact of the recruiting process on athletes' decisions concerning school choice. Given the prominence of football in America, college football recruiting is an area in the sociology of sport literature that has been given little scholarly attention with the exception of the study conducted by Klenosky and colleagues (2001).

The Recruiting Process: A Missing Piece of the Puzzle

In popular media outlets (see Ball, 2002; Martinez, 2004), college football recruiting is often described as difficult, hectic, pressure-packed, fun, and challenging, especially when several schools are competing for the same top athletes. As indicated by ESPN sportswriter, Bruce Feldman, college football recruiting operates on its own schedule independent of football season (Feldman, 2007). The finale, National Signing Day, falls on the first Wednesday in February when college football programs can sign as many as twenty-five prospective student-athletes. In Feldman's 2007 book entitled "Meat Market: Inside the Smash-Mouth World of College Football Recruiting," he describes the inside workings of the Ole Miss football program during recruiting season. With permission from former Ole Miss head coach Ed Orgeron, Feldman was privy to much of the recruiting process and describes the events which took place inside the "war room" at Ole Miss.

During recruiting season, prospective student-athletes make official and unofficial visits to college campuses. The main difference between official and unofficial visits is that official visits are paid visits and recruits are paired with a player-host who shows the recruit the day-to-day ins and outs of playing football and making a home in a particular college town (Personal communication, October 13, 2008). These visits allow a recruit to observe firsthand the workings of the football program, meet the coaching staff, and gather information about academic programs offered by the university.

Throughout the recruiting season, prospective student-athletes may receive scholarship offers by coaches representing interested college football programs. Once an offer is made, prospects may verbally commit at that time or officially commit on National Signing Day by signing a National Letter of Intent. It is not uncommon for prospects to verbally commit to a school after receiving an offer and then later de-commit before National Signing Day to accept

an offer from another program. However, once a National Letter of Intent is signed, the recruit is committed to that program. The only way a recruit can be released from his commitment at this time is for the football program to release him which means he loses one year of eligible playing time.

Although it is discouraged, rumors of negative recruiting (i.e., “bad-mouthing” or pointing out the faults or weaknesses of a competing program rather than highlighting the strengths of one’s own program), seem to appear in early February near National Signing Day as coaches become desperate for a talented signing class (Barnhart, 2003; Feldman, 2007; MacDonald, 2008). According to the Women’s Sports Foundation (2008), negative recruiting is viewed as “an unethical recruitment strategy” that provides programs with “an unfair advantage based on perpetuating stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions” (p. 1). The negativity, or mud flinging, typically begins when rivals perceive any given school as a threat. For purposes of this study, negative recruiting is understood to include “any instance when a coach or representative from a rival institution ‘bad-mouths’ or emphasizes the faults and weaknesses of a competing athletic program or university when interacting with prospective student-athletes, including the perpetuation of stereotypes, myths, or misconceptions about the university or athletic program.”

Negative recruiting is the “underbelly” of college football recruiting – some coaches publicly deny it occurs while others privately acknowledge it; however, a fine line exists between what one coach considers negative recruiting and what another, like former Clemson head coach Tommy Bowden, refers to as “comparative analysis” (MacDonald, 2008). While it is acceptable for recruiting coaches to point out the strengths and weaknesses of competing programs, compare graduation rates of student-athletes, and offer pros and cons given the size of each community, it is argued that negative recruiting occurs when “facts or half-truths are selectively highlighted to create an unflattering narrative of the rival, turning some recruiting and political campaigns into plays on people’s fears” (MacDonald, 2008, p. 1).

Is negative recruiting wrong? The answer is unclear among coaches and players and nowhere to be found in the NCAA Division I Manual (The National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2006). According to a representative at the NCAA, the NCAA is more concerned with what coaches “do” (e.g., economic compensation, contact violations, recruiting violations) rather than what coaches “say” to prospects (Personal communication with NCAA representative, April 5, 2010). Although it has not happened in the last sixteen years, the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) can suspend a member coach from its organization for knowingly lying to or misleading prospective student-athletes (Barnhart, 2003). The NCAA and AFCA represent two separate governing bodies.

Negative recruiting is believed to be more common in the South and in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) than in any other region or collegiate sports conference in America (Barnhart, 2003). Although the University of Mississippi has attempted to improve its image concerning race with the removal of “Colonel Rebel” and the Confederate battle flag from sporting events, rival universities and coaches are not above implementing negative recruiting tactics to sway black athletes from signing with Ole Miss (Barnhart, 2003; Feldman, 2007; Greenburg, 1996). At the same time, family and economic compensations are often major deal makers or breakers for student-athletes whose families are struggling financially and should not be disregarded as financial needs may trump racial concerns for many black and white student-athletes when making decisions on where to play collegiate football.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual and theoretical framework for this project is guided by stigma theory and analysis. A pure rational choice theory or model may offer explanations as to why a recruit would choose (or not) to attend and play college football at a particular school by discussing the costs and benefits associated with his individual decision. However, evidence suggests there is more involved than a simple weighing of the pros and cons of various attributes in recruits' decisions about playing college football at Ole Miss. As discussed previously, the main focus of this paper is to explore the stigmatized identity associated with the University of Mississippi, as well as how those associated with the Ole Miss football program manage the university's negative identity when interacting with prospective student-athletes. This approach to investigating school choice decisions made by student-athletes moves beyond a focus on rational, calculated decision-making by addressing ways in which a sports practice – negative recruiting – intersects with the identity of an educational institution.

In his seminal work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman defines *stigma* as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman, 1965, p. 3), signifying a loss of status for the individual in public situations. An individual's unique characteristics are not the focus of stigma analysis; the focus is on the relationship between a stigmatized individual and those agents of social control defining the stigma. Goffman (1965) identified three types of stigmas: those of the body (e.g., physical deformities), blemishes of an individual's character (e.g., weak will, dishonesty, unnatural passions) which often result from occurrences in the past, and those of a tribal nature (e.g., race, religion, nation) which may be transmitted through lineage, contaminating all members. While all three types of stigma identified by Goffman are in reference to stigmatized individuals, I argue that stigma can also be assigned or applied to institutions. Similar to stigmatized individuals, institutions may also possess negative attributes which devalues or discredits the institution in the eyes of others.

Goffman (1965) primarily emphasized individuals' perceptions of the stigmatized other rather than focusing on how a stigmatized individual coped with being devalued or labeled deviant. Previous research attempted to fill that gap by exploring coping mechanisms or strategies used by stigmatized individuals to lessen the impact of stigma in their daily lives. This line of research emphasizing coping strategies has included ways female athletes manage the lesbian label (Blinde & Taub, 1992), exploitation of the stigma itself in an attempt to alter the outcomes of exchange (Gramling & Forsythe, 1987), examining the effectiveness of coping orientations used by those diagnosed with a mental illness (Link, Mirotznic, & Cullen, 1991), as well as how gay Christian males manage the stigma of being homosexual (Yip, 1997). Some of the most effective coping strategies are those that control and manage information about the stigma or attempt to normalize the stigma by re-educating the public (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Yip, 1997), attribute negative feedback to prejudiced attitudes against the stigmatized group (Crocker & Major, 1989), and use positive personal experiences to neutralize the stigma (Crocker & Major, 1989; Yip, 1997). While it is not uncommon for stigmatized individuals or groups to adopt coping strategies to deal with a stigmatized identity, some coping strategies may do more harm than good given that culture reinforces stigma making it difficult to overcome (Link, Mirotznic, & Cullen, 1991).

As indicated above, most research investigating stigma has focused primarily on stigmatized individuals. Moreover, this line of research has emphasized coping models, viewing individuals as passive recipients or targets of labeling while typically focusing on negative

outcomes (Shih, 2004). Recent research, however, views stigmatized individuals as active participants seeking positive outcomes as they understand the world in which they live (Crocker & Major, 1989; 2003; Shih, 2004). In contrast to coping strategies, empowerment strategies provide stigmatized individuals with a sense of accomplishment and self-worth when they are able to successfully manage the stigmatized identity. Individual level processes identified as useful in helping overcome the consequences of stigmatization include (1) compensation – skills aimed at being more assertive or likable to disconfirm stereotypes, (2) strategic interpretation of the social environment – changing referent groups to one of equal or lesser status to minimize or deny prejudice, and (3) a focus on multiple identities – defining oneself by other identities as opposed to the stigmatized identity (Shih, 2004). It is argued that those who adopt empowerment strategies, rather than coping strategies, better manage and live more successfully with stigmatized identities.

Stigma theory and analysis is appropriate for this study in many ways. The University of Mississippi has physical deformities, to use Goffman's term, due to the university's display of confederate symbols. The university's history and association with confederate symbols has blemished or weakened Ole Miss' integrity as a progressive educational institution in the eyes of many. Furthermore, the negative image of Ole Miss as a place where race has been and continues to be a problem is transmitted to individuals associated with the University of Mississippi. In all of these ways, the stigmatized identity of Ole Miss devalues the institution and denies the university full social acceptance in public situations.

In this paper, I explore the stigmatized identity of an institution, Ole Miss, to gain a better understanding of how the labeling process informs and affects the recruiting efforts of the Ole Miss Rebel football program. Once the stigmas associated with Ole Miss have been identified through negative recruiting tactics, I examine the management strategies employed by program administrators (e.g., assistant coaches and athletic administrators) and football players at Ole Miss as they attempt to successfully manage or cope with the stigmatized identity of the University of Mississippi.

Methods

Data Collection Procedures

The Setting. The goal of this project is to examine the debate over the identity of the University of Mississippi through the lens of football recruiting at Ole Miss. Due to the history and national stigma of racism associated with Mississippi, and more specifically the University of Mississippi, Ole Miss and Mississippi State were both great site selections for this study. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with participants at Ole Miss during April 2004 and Mississippi State in April 2005.

Participants. In a study of this nature, a random sample would not be sufficient as the goal of this study is to get at the heart of recruiting strategies, particularly negative recruiting. For this reason, a purposive sampling technique was necessary. With assistance from a knowledgeable member of the administrative football staff at each university, individuals were selected on the basis of very specific criteria – their experiences with negative recruiting – to allow participants who were familiar with negative recruiting to speak and reflect upon their experiences. While it is acknowledged that all student-athletes may have had a negative recruiting experience, mediocre players or walk-ons are not as likely to be recruited negatively

given that they are not highly sought after by several competing football programs. The players identified by an administrative staff member at each university are those who were among the top recruits in the nation as evidenced by several recruiting websites (e.g., Rivals.com, Scout.com), thus, they represent those most likely to be negatively recruited as coaches are often vying for the same top athletes to ensure a winning season. The selection of prominent football players at both universities (thirteen black and six white) was pertinent because these individuals were identified as top recruits in the nation who were highly sought after by several collegiate football programs.

Being that I wanted to compare different perspectives, I also employed a multi-point sampling procedure. Assistant coaches (two black and one white) and others who assist with recruiting efforts (one black university vice chancellor, one white assistant athletic director, and one white editor for a recruiting publication covering Ole Miss) were interviewed along with prominent football players at Ole Miss, as well as players at Mississippi State University, the in-state rival of Ole Miss. Including players from Mississippi State provides an opportunity to hear from student-athletes who were recruited by, but turned down, Ole Miss, thus adding another perspective to the study at hand. Since most studies in the area of athletic recruiting typically involve one group, my study contributes to this body of literature by bringing in the voices of various constituents. Due to the gendered nature of the sport, all twenty-five interviewees were male.⁵

In-Depth Interviews. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion; however, unanticipated topics that surfaced during the interview were pursued further through follow-up questions not originally included in the interview questionnaire. Topics for my interview questionnaire were informed by conversations with a family member who was employed by Ole Miss and who worked as an athletic administrator in the area of football recruiting. Interviews were recorded on audiotape and lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Additional notes were taken after the interview to enhance the analysis of recorded accounts.

A pre-interview questionnaire was administered to participants to gather demographic information and consent. For players, the information collected consisted of hometown, high school and/or junior college, age, class status, race/ethnicity, college major, parental education, parental employment, scholarship status, year signed, position, and sites where official/unofficial visits were taken. In general, interview questions for players covered topics such as playing football at Ole Miss/MSU; reasons for choosing a particular program; thoughts and impressions about Ole Miss/MSU before, during and after making the decision to play there; positive and negative recruiting experiences at Ole Miss/MSU, as well as other programs; the influence of negative recruiting on college choice; and race relations at Ole Miss/MSU and whether or not race relations factored into decisions of school choice. In addition to the above, Ole Miss players were also asked specific questions related to the “Colonel Rebel” mascot, “Dixie,” and the Confederate battle flag’s association with Ole Miss.

Coaches, administrators, and those who assist with recruiting efforts at Ole Miss were asked similar questions. A pre-interview questionnaire was administered to participants to gather demographic information and consent. The information collected consisted of previous job locations, current coaching/recruiting position, job responsibilities, recruiting areas, number

⁵ The various constituents interviewed reflect a range of different standpoints, transitional states, and come from a variety of life circumstances. The perspectives that emerge from these interviews are not expected or intended to be exhaustive of all possible perspectives of those who are part of the athletic programs at Ole Miss or Mississippi State University.

of years at Ole Miss, age, race/ethnicity, and previous college program participation. In general, interview questions covered topics such as coaching/recruiting football at Ole Miss; reasons for choosing Ole Miss; thoughts and impressions about Ole Miss before and after making the decision to coach/recruit there; most effective recruiting practices at Ole Miss; and incidences of negative recruiting and their responses when confronted by a recruit. In addition to these questions, participants were also asked specifically about the "Colonel Rebel" mascot, "Dixie," and the Confederate battle flag's association with the university.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis procedures are anchored in the proposed research questions, the review of existing literature, and the theoretical perspective, then coded appropriately by hand. Interview transcripts were analyzed using two interpretive frameworks: (1) a theory-generated coding scheme based on Goffman's concept of stigma and stigma management (i.e., identifying negative attributes, as well as strategies used by individuals to deal with stigmatized identities), and (2) an emergent themes technique to capture other issues that may surface apart from those highlighted by the theoretical framework (i.e., impact of negative recruiting and the effectiveness of strategies used to manage the stigmatized identity of Ole Miss concerning school choice decisions made by student-athletes).

The first phase of analysis was guided by the first research question "How is Ole Miss being portrayed by individuals from competing football programs during recruiting season when interacting with prospective student-athletes?" Keeping in mind my conceptualization of negative recruiting and Goffman's definition of stigma, I read through the interview transcripts looking for ways individuals unaffiliated with Ole Miss were portraying Ole Miss to prospective student-athletes. As evidence was found, it was placed in a separate word document for later coding. I read through and numerically coded each portrayal to distinguish between different themes as identified and supported with quotes from personal interviews. Next, I grouped the new data by each theme or negative identity. During this process, I was mindful to be aware of unanticipated themes or concepts that may emerge. Once themes were identified, they became definitive concepts. I went back to the full interview transcripts a second time to determine whether or not I may have missed evidence of the above.

After stigmas or negative identities were identified, I moved to answer the second research question: "When a negative identity is activated, how do those associated with the Ole Miss Rebel football program manage the stigmatized identity when interacting with prospective student-athletes?" To answer this question, I took each theme and read through the interview transcripts looking for strategies and techniques used by those associated with Ole Miss to manage each stigmatized identity. Once management strategies for each theme or stigmatized identity were identified, the data were grouped to further distinguish between coping strategies and empowerment strategies used to counter each negative identity. Finally I looked for patterns of usage among those associated with Ole Miss to determine whether or not there were differences between the likelihood of using a coping strategy or empowerment strategy to successfully manage the stigmatized identity of Ole Miss.

Results

Analysis of interview transcripts and relevant documents were guided by the research questions, the review of existing literature, the theoretical perspective, and then coded appropriately by hand. In keeping with stigma analysis, the institution's unique characteristics are not the focus of stigma analysis; instead, the focus is on the relationship between Ole Miss, the institution whose stigma is defined, and the agents of social control who define the stigma (i.e., negative recruiters) or manage the stigma (i.e., individuals associated with Ole Miss) when interacting with prospective student-athletes. Negative recruiting involves any instance when coaches, administrations, fans, or alumni from a particular school point out the faults or weakness of a competing program, or emphasize stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions to perpetuate people's fears.

When interviewees were asked about recruiting experiences, three themes or negative identities emerged concerning the institutional identity of Ole Miss: (1) Ole Miss is a historically anti-black institution in a state with a distinctively racist past, (2) Ole Miss is a school currently characterized by strained race relations, and (3) Ole Miss is an elitist university catering to upper-middle class whites. The implications of the results are discussed below in terms of negative recruiting tactics designed to stigmatize Ole Miss, as well as stigma management strategies employed by those associated with the Ole Miss Rebel football program as they attempt to manage the stigmatized identity of the university as they interact with prospective student-athletes.

Ole Miss: A Historically Anti-Black Institution in a State with a Distinctively Racist Past

The first negative recruiting tactic that emerged to devalue or discredit Ole Miss presents the university as *a historically anti-black institution in a state with a distinctively racist past*. While it is true that both Ole Miss and Mississippi have a history of being defenders of segregation (e.g., the White Citizen's Council, the assassination of Medgar Evers, James Meredith's integration of Ole Miss) and the symbols of resistance in Mississippi continue to have a cultural memory, the accuracy of this portrayal is not the primary focus when it comes to stigma or negative recruiting. Guided by stigma analysis, the point is that individuals associated with competing football programs are engaging in negative recruiting to discredit Ole Miss by using historical information to perpetuate fears a student-athlete may have about race relations in Mississippi. For example, a black student-athlete from Georgia, who was recruited by both Ole Miss and Mississippi State, mentioned that when he was being recruited by programs outside of Mississippi he was told "to watch what roads I go down, to watch what I say, to watch what I do. [They would] talk about what Mississippi used to be like and say that things still are like that" implying that the Jim Crow era mentality is still alive in Mississippi and an ideology of white supremacy remains.

Although the oppressive history of Mississippi is used by negative recruiters from surrounding states when interacting with prospective student-athletes, Ole Miss typically becomes the primary target as indicated by a former black defensive player for Mississippi State who was also recruited by Ole Miss and South Carolina. When asked whether or not race was discussed when he was being recruited, he replied "That's the funny part. You never heard anything about race in South Carolina but you always heard it about Ole Miss." Along those

same lines, a white assistant coach at Ole Miss who recruited outside of the state, spending most of his time in Florida, noted that

If you go anywhere...and if you're dealing with Mississippi...Mississippi does carry a negative image...a **racial** negative image and that is used [pause] at times [pause] by certain people...You'll still hear, 'I can't believe you want to let your son go to Mississippi.' For some reason [Ole Miss] is a bigger target and I don't understand why other than maybe for years, maybe, flaunting the flag.

This quote from a former assistant coach at Ole Miss illustrates the stigma or negative identity associated with Mississippi and Ole Miss as a historically anti-black institution in a state with a distinctively racist past as a result of the continued presence of the Confederate battle flag. Not only was the Confederate flag proudly displayed at Ole Miss Rebel football games, but the symbol remains on the state flag of Mississippi. That several hate groups (e.g., the Klu Klux Klan) have adopted the Confederate battle flag has further contributed to the negative image the Confederate battle flag brings to Ole Miss and Mississippi. However, recruits and their parents are not merely blank slates who come into the recruiting process without prior knowledge of historical events. For example, when I asked a black defensive player at Mississippi State about his most negative recruiting experience, he replied that although he “enjoyed the trip, and “liked the school and the program,” it was seeing the Confederate battle flag flying at Ole Miss that ranked among his most negative recruiting experiences. When I asked why, he replied, “It wasn't that it insulted me. It was just from hearing how my mother grew up and my grandmother and how my father [pause], it was seeing that flag.” He continued to say that it was the way the flag was portrayed to him that day by campus hostesses. “They were like, ‘Look at the flag.’ They were white, you know what I'm saying, and they were like ‘Look at the flag, isn't it beautiful?’ and I was like, ‘No, it ain't beautiful.’” As illustrated by this former player at Mississippi State, symbols of resistance in Mississippi, such as the Confederate battle flag, continue to have a cultural memory for many and may influence a student-athlete's decision concerning school choice regardless of what is presented to them by individuals from competing programs.

In reference to Confederate symbols, a self-proclaimed “recruiting junkie” and editor of a recruiting publication covering Ole Miss explained:

It's like going into a fight with one hand tied behind your back. You can kick and hit with one arm and you might win some, but it sure does handicap you. I think we're handicapping ourselves, not only athletically, but academically with some of these symbols...It's the biggest negative for Ole Miss in recruiting.

This quote demonstrates the challenges faced by the Ole Miss athletic staff over the university and fans' use and display of Confederate symbols during sporting events. When this negative identity of Ole Miss as a historically racist institution in a state with a distinctively racist past is activated by individuals associated with competing football programs (e.g., coaches, fans, alumni), those associated with Ole Miss employ a range of strategies to manage this stigma.

As a rejoinder to this negative recruiting tactic, a white Ole Miss administrator employs a common coping strategy to overcome the consequences of stigmatization as illustrated below:

If a player is going to not come to Ole Miss because he thinks we're going to make him sit on the back of the bus or because we're going to play Dixie thinking, boy, we wish the Confederacy was still here, then he doesn't need to be at Ole Miss and we're not going to get him. So, I think it's a double-edged sword. I hate that [negative recruiting] happens but at the same time it probably weeds out a lot of the guys that we don't want on our team. I think these kids have put up with a lot of crap, excuse me, from other schools. It's kind of helped us weed through a lot of the character issues with a lot of these prospects. It makes our job easier because if we can't convince a kid that we're not racist, then we are not going to get him, and we probably don't want him playing for us.

Individuals who use coping strategies to manage the consequences of stigmatization seek to lessen the impact of stigma in public situations as they attempt to understand the social world in which they operate. As evidenced above, this former assistant athletic director has come to believe the stigma is a blessing that has taught him about the character, or lack thereof, of young people. In this instance, he transfers the responsibility of the outcome (i.e., whether or not to sign with Ole Miss) to recruits who lack character rather than the institution. While the administrator's phrasing concerning "character issues" could potentially be offensive, in this context he is referring to a recruit who is influenced by negative recruiting rather than his own preconceived notions of Ole Miss. In this administrator's mind, if a recruit chooses not to play football at Ole Miss because he is influenced by negative recruiting tactics, it is because the recruit holds a prejudiced attitude towards Ole Miss which would be difficult to change.

Unlike the former assistant athletic director, coaches employed at Ole Miss use empowerment strategies as well as and coping strategies to dispel the stigma that Ole Miss is a historically anti-black institution in a state with a distinctively racist past. As they seek positive outcomes, coaches at Ole Miss engage in strategic interpretation of the environment. This empowerment strategy allows them to compare themselves equally to other colleges and universities in the South with respect to their Southern heritage as they attempt to minimize the stigmatized identity of Ole Miss. When this negative identity is activated, coaches "attack the attacker" by questioning the credibility of the information and offering examples of other athletic programs in the SEC who have emblems associated with the "Old South." For example, two former coaches, one white and one black, pointed out that competing schools in the SEC and their fans also have flags with "the same stars and bars in their school colors" and that "mascots like the Gamecock, Tigers, and Bayou Bengal were also symbolic of Confederate soldiers going off to fight in the Civil War." A black defensive coach also shared this position. When questioned by prospective student-athletes on this issue, he said "you have to rip it apart – attack everything" that is wrongly presented to prospective student-athletes regarding the symbols or the mascot.

Along with empowerment strategies, a black defensive coach at Ole Miss emphasizes a coping mechanism often used by stigmatized individuals to deal with the consequences of

stigmatization, one that neutralizes the stigma by re-educating the public. Specifically, this former coach suggests that educating people on the history of all southern universities seems to help minimize this negative portrayal of Ole Miss and Mississippi. In other words, to lessen the stigma of Ole Miss as a historically anti-black institution in a state with a distinctively racist past, defensive justifications are offered suggesting this is an identity shared by most, if not all, educational institutions in the South. However, unlike Ole Miss, most Southern institutions have had a celebrated break with their racially divisive past. For example, Alabama began recruiting black student-athletes under head coach “Bear” Bryant, who was a defender of the process (although this came after a loss to an integrated USC football team), and Tennessee had the first African American quarterback in the SEC. Kentucky hired Tubby Smith as its head basketball coach, and Mississippi State hired Sylvester Croom, making him the first black head coach of an SEC football team. What individuals associated with Ole Miss often fail to realize is that the problematic history of race relations in Mississippi, as well as the images of the integration of Ole Miss and its display of Confederate symbols, cannot simply be erased by stating this is in the past.

Ole Miss: A School Currently Characterized by Strained Race Relations

The second negative recruiting tactic that emerged to devalue or discredit Ole Miss presents the university as *a school currently characterized by strained race relations*. Keeping with stigma analysis, the focus is the relationship between the stigmatized individual or institution and those defining the stigma. In other words, individuals associated with competing football programs use this recruiting strategy to define Ole Miss negatively with the intention of discouraging student-athletes from signing with a competing program. For example, a black defensive player at Mississippi State, who was also recruited by Ole Miss, said that when he was being recruited coaches and fans of rival universities made comments to him like “Why are you going up there [Ole Miss]? You know they don’t like black kids, you won’t fit in.” He continued to say “You always heard that about Ole Miss but you never heard that about [Mississippi] State.” When I later asked him if race figured into his decision to sign with Mississippi State over Ole Miss, he replied “Yes. I thought [race] was less of a problem here than it was at Ole Miss....It wasn’t like it aided in [Mississippi] State getting me but it hurt Ole Miss for me to go up there.”

At times, engaging in negative recruiting practices can backfire on a competing school as stigma not only affects the “marked” but can affect the “unmarked” individual or institution as well. When asked about his most negative recruiting experience at a school other than Ole Miss, one black defensive player who eventually signed with Ole Miss replied:

My most negative? [laughs] I’m not going to call out the school name, but the most negative was when I visited a certain school that knew I had committed to Ole Miss...I really had fun, but once we got to dinner I got around the other guys who knew that I was coming here, they just started talking a whole lot of noise to me, you know, picking out the negative things about Ole Miss. Talking about how racist it was. Talking about how I’m going to play for white people around here. They started talking bad to me, talking about wanting to beat me up. They were like oh, f-him, we don’t

need him around here anyway. That really made me turn my back on that school.

One possible reason the current state of race relations at Ole Miss remains contentious, aside from the sheer competition that exists between programs vying for the same top recruits in the nation, is the result of political and popular debates that often erupt over the university's association with Confederate symbols. Debates over the Colonel Rebel mascot have dominated past and present discussions of the University of Mississippi. Vehement protests were waged in 2003 and more recently in 2010 over whether or not to keep the mascot, a signifier of the "Old South." According to an editor of a recruiting publication covering Ole Miss, people who are recruiting against Ole Miss really seem to be driving that image home. He noted that in the first four or five years he was covering recruiting at Ole Miss no one ever mentioned "Colonel Rebel," but that once the mascot was banned from the sidelines in 2003, recruits started "talking about 'Colonel Reb' ...implying that was a symbol of racism, of the Old South, of that old white traditional antebellum thing." While this negative recruiting tactic may influence a prospective student-athlete's decision about playing college football at Ole Miss if race is a concern, prior awareness of such debates may also influence school choice decisions as these are narratives to which many recruits and their families would have been exposed.

When the negative identity of Ole Miss as a school currently characterized by strained race relations is activated by individuals associated with competing programs, coaches and others who assist with recruiting efforts engage in a number of strategies to manage the consequences of stigmatization. One empowerment strategy used to manage this negative identity is to strategically interpret the environment for the recruits in order to deny prejudice. In other words, when race at Ole Miss is a concern, coaches introduce recruits and their families to prominent African Americans on campus "like Dr. Ross and Dr. Wallace" because they "know the recruits and their families will ask [where the black people are]." Strategically interpreting the environment in this manner allows coaches at Ole Miss to redefine Ole Miss as a place where race is not a problem thereby disconfirming the stigmatized identity of Ole Miss as a school currently characterized by strained race relations.

A second empowerment strategy used to confront the stigma of Ole Miss where race is a problem is to define Ole Miss by identities deemed more positive. As he assists with recruiting efforts where race is concerned, a black vice chancellor acknowledged that "Ole Miss is not a fit for everybody." This university administrator's main goal as he interacts with prospective student-athletes is to present the University of Mississippi, and to provide information they need as students, not merely student-athletes, so they can make the best decision for themselves. Rather than focusing on and attempting to dispel the "racist" label associated with Ole Miss, this university administrator chooses to focus on the positive aspects (e.g., leaders across the state and country who graduated from Ole Miss, leadership opportunities on campus, life outside of sports and the classroom) rather than solely addressing the negative. He continued to say that in "talking with students and parents, I want them to look at what we offer, to look at the quality of life on our campus" such as "enrollment and retention rates, and academic and student life." He points out that student enrollment has increased "each of the last ten years" and explains the increase to be the result of "providing a quality education and a quality of life for students on campus." At the time of the interviews black student enrollment at Ole Miss was approximately thirteen percent, ranking in the top three of all Southeastern Conference schools. While this may be positive for Ole Miss, black student enrollment at Mississippi State was approximately thirty-

five percent, which is more comparable to the racial/ethnic distribution in the population of Mississippi as opposed to the national distribution as was the case for Ole Miss meaning this could potentially be a source of tension on campus. This university administrator believes he is presenting a more positive image of Ole Miss to prospective student-athletes by defining Ole Miss by its other identities rather than focusing on the negative identity of Ole Miss as a school where race remains a problem.

Coaches and athletic administrators employ a third empowerment strategy to neutralize the stigma and present Ole Miss in a more favorable light. Members of the recruiting staff ensure they know the “background of each recruit” so they can match their strengths with his “wants and needs” so he “starts to feel like he is at home” at Ole Miss. One way they ensure a recruit “feels at home” during an official visit is to match prospective student-athletes with player-hosts (i.e., current players) who have similar interests or backgrounds, especially when that prospective student-athlete is unsure or concerned about the current state of race relations on campus or in Oxford. For example, when asked about his most positive recruiting experience, an Ole Miss player replied “I’d say it was the person, my player-host that they put me with. He was kind of a guy like me.” Coaches and recruiters place value on getting to know the recruits and their families, as well as the current players’ interests and personalities so that recruits and player-hosts can be matched suitably. By being mindful to pair recruits and player-hosts in this manner, those associated with Ole Miss are being proactive by skillfully mastering those areas that stigmatize, thus making themselves more likable as they dispel the negative identity of Ole Miss as a school with strained race relations. According to members of the recruiting staff, recruits who have the opportunity to visit campus with their families do not seem to be swayed as easily by negative recruiting tactics compared to those who do not take an official visit to Ole Miss.

Although the overall impression of current race relations at Ole Miss by those interviewed was positive, a black offensive player at Ole Miss did express concern over how he might be treated by others on campus if he was not a football player:

Sometimes I do wonder about what if I wasn’t a big time football player. Would things be different as far as race or anything like that? Would people say something to me because I’m not an athlete, someone who represents Ole Miss? I always wonder about that you know. If I was just a normal student, would it be different?

While perceptions of race relations appear to be improving and are no longer viewed as a major issue on campus by the majority of those interviewed at Ole Miss, doubt lingers for some as evidenced in this quote. As individuals associated with Ole Miss begin to understand the impact of this negative identity, empowerment strategies employed by coaches, members of the recruiting staff, and university administrators allow them to better manage and live more successfully with the stigmatized identity of Ole Miss as a school currently characterized by strained race relations.

Ole Miss: An Elitist University Catering to Upper-Middle Class Whites

A final negative recruiting tactic that emerged to devalue or discredit Ole Miss presents the university as *an elitist university catering to upper-middle class whites*. The previous negative recruiting tactics were primarily aimed at black student-athletes; however, individuals associated with competing football programs use this recruiting strategy to define Ole Miss negatively with the intention of discouraging both black and white student-athletes from signing with Ole Miss. According to a former black assistant coach at Ole Miss, comments heard by recruits range from “there are too many white folks there [at Ole Miss] and you’ll never fit in to [a particular head coach at a competing school in Mississippi] telling players ‘our kids are Pell Grant kids and you’ll fit in better here’.” He further suggested that instances like this happen more often than not because a competing coach either wants the recruit for his program, or if he cannot get him, he does not want a recruit to go to a school he views as a threat.

While negative recruiting tactics may influence a recruit’s decision about where to play college football, this decision is not entirely informed by the recruiting process or external sources (e.g., outside agitators). When asked about his impression of Ole Miss before his official visit (i.e., paid visits with player-host as guide), a white offensive player for Ole Miss recalled thinking “Oxford’s just a big BMW town.” When he visited campus on game day he recalled that “everyone was wearing ties and coats and [he] told his dad [that] this is terrible because [he] had on a t-shirt and pair of jeans.” This player remembered feeling out of place at a college football game where the students, Greek and non-Greek alike, are known for wearing their Sunday best. However, after his official visit and spending some time in Oxford, he realized “that up here in Oxford, grant it, Greek life may be a mainstream thing, but there are other things to do and that was really encouraging.” Sharing a similar experience, another white player at Ole Miss replied:

The first time I came up here I thought it was just a rich boy’s school. I see eighteen to twenty-two year-old kids, KIDS, driving around in BMWs. Cars ranging from twenty-five thousand to some are eighty thousand dollars. I come from a family, a hard-working blue-collar family, and I had cousins up here, that played ball here, and they wanted me to come check it out. I looked at them and said there ain’t no way that I’ll fit in up here. I don’t want a girlfriend that comes from a family like that because she would never be happy with the type of person that I am or what I have to offer her.

The above quote offers support for the initial impression given off by students and alumni of Ole Miss as an elitist university that caters to the upper-middle class. Given his initial impression, this particular Ole Miss football player who self-identifies as working class did not believe he would feel comfortable at Ole Miss; however, after his official visit when he was introduced to members of the football team and other recruits who were visiting, the same player had a change of heart:

Those people that took me in from the team, I got to know them. These are some good ole boys. They are just simple men. There’s nothing fancy about them. They come from regular average families. They’re here to play football.

Given the phrase “good ole boys” has a long history in Southern culture, a white athlete saying that the Ole Miss Rebel football team is filled with “good ole boys” potentially has a negative stigma attached to it (i.e., the team is comprised of rednecks and racists who love Dixie and proudly display the Confederate battle flag). However, in this context, he was comparing football players who like to hunt and who enjoy the outdoors with students who join fraternities and sororities on campus. While there is a racial element to his statement, his comment was depicting class differences as Ole Miss is often thought of as a snobby, preppy rich school whose students proudly wear shirts that read “We’re not snobs, we’re just better than you” and “Ole Miss, the Harvard of the South.”

Individuals associated with the Ole Miss Rebel football program employ both empowerment and coping strategies as they attempt to manage the negative identity of Ole Miss as an elitist university catering to upper-middle class whites. On occasions when this stigmatized identity is activated, coaches and members of the recruiting staff invite recruits and their families to come and see for themselves firsthand what the atmosphere at Ole Miss is like. In this manner, coaches and recruiting staff use an empowerment strategy as they define the institutional identity of Ole Miss by other identities (e.g., the football program, academics, recreation/leisure opportunities) rather than one deemed negative. The following quote from a white player at Ole Miss, who was asked about his most positive recruiting experience while visiting Ole Miss, demonstrates the importance of campus visits and the impact that the visit can have on changing a recruit’s perception:

It’s changed as far as the rich boy school because I’ve met a lot of people that are pretty down to earth. They might come from rich families but you’d never ever know it. I’d also learned to find out that a lot of the people in the BMWs and stuff like that, a lot of it’s an act because some of them don’t really have the money and they’re just trying to fit in as much as they can. I think their parents are trying to make them fit in more than anything. I hate that. But other than that, campus and the university as a whole is perfect.

Not only does this quote illustrate the extent to which an official visit may change a recruit’s perception about Ole Miss as an elitist institution, it also demonstrates a coping technique, one used by a white Ole Miss football player, as he attempts to live with the consequences of stigmatization. In his attempt to minimize the stigma, this player denies that current students are responsible for the negative identity associated with Ole Miss by placing responsibility on parents. In other words, current students who attend Ole Miss are not the cause for this negative identity but parents, some of whom are alumni, are responsible. While this white football player at Ole Miss rationalizes student behavior by blaming parents, a black player at Ole Miss normalizes the stigma of Ole Miss as an elitist university that caters to upper-middle class whites by emphasizing university tradition as the reason “students go to the game...in collared-shirts and suits.” When asked if he would consider dressing up in his Sunday best on game day if he was not a football player, he smiled and said “I don’t know. I think I’d have to go in just my t-shirt and jeans.”

In sum, a wide range of negative recruiting tactics are used by competing coaches to stigmatize Ole Miss, yet each tactic is met with an empowerment or coping strategy designed to

successfully manage or normalize the negative identity depending on the background and experience of those involved. From the interviews, it is apparent that black athletes experience more negative recruiting than white athletes, which is not surprising given the over-representation of black athletes at predominantly white universities. However, white athletes are not unaffected by the use of negative recruiting from competing institutions and coaches. While black prospective student-athletes' experiences with negative recruiting center around issues of race, class seems to be the focus of negative recruiters when interacting with white student-athletes being recruited to play collegiate football at Ole Miss.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using in-depth interviews this study set out to examine the political and popular debates over the identity of Ole Miss utilizing the theoretical concepts of stigma and stigma management at both the structural (institutional) and situational (interpersonal) levels through the lens of college football recruiting. The visibility of, and often times, vehement protests over the Confederate symbols associated with the university, as well as its history and location in the South, has played a large role in producing negative images of the university. Key findings indicate that negative recruiting techniques used by coaches and fans from competing programs stigmatize Ole Miss as (1) a historically anti-black institution in a state with a distinctively racist past, (2) a school currently characterized by strained race relations, and (3) an elitist university catering to upper-middle class whites. In response to each negative recruiting tactic used to stigmatize the university, individuals associated with recruiting efforts for the Ole Miss Rebel football program enlist a number of corresponding techniques designed to successfully manage or normalize each negative identity. The presumed effectiveness of such management strategies is arguably reflected by the talented class of recruits Ole Miss has signed in recent years.

The various coping and empowerment strategies employed to manage the institutional identity of Ole Miss are used interchangeably by coaches, players, and those involved in recruiting efforts for the Ole Miss Rebel football program when interacting with prospective student-athletes. Coaches and members of the recruiting staff simultaneously use coping strategies and empowerment strategies to manage two negative identities associated with Ole Miss, those depicting Ole Miss as a historically black institution in a state with a distinctively racist past and as an elitist university catering to upper-middle class whites. Individuals associated with Ole Miss acknowledge the accuracy of these negative identities and use coping strategies to lessen the impact of stigma when interacting with prospective student-athletes. Although they acknowledge the accuracy of the stigma, coaches and administrators simultaneously use empowerment strategies to redefine Ole Miss to better manage and live successfully with the stigmatized identity. Not only do these skills provide an opportunity to present Ole Miss in a more favorable light, but those associated with Ole Miss can highlight positive aspects of the university rather than solely focusing on the negative.

Given doubts concerning the current state of race relations at Ole Miss, members of the athletic staff and others who assist with recruiting for the Ole Miss Rebel football program engage empowerment strategies to confront this negative identity. As they define the university by other identities, individuals associated with Ole Miss hope to dismiss the stigma of the university as a school currently characterized by strained race relations when interacting with prospective student-athletes. One strategy that has been successful in managing this stigmatized identity is to invite recruits and their families to visit campus. However, student-athletes and

their parents are not merely blank slates when they become involved in the recruiting process. While negative recruiting practices may influence school choice decisions, prospective student-athletes have their own educational knowledge of both historical and current events involving racial hostility that have taken place in Mississippi, as well as at the University of Mississippi in particular. Knowledge of such events will be interpreted and implemented by the student-athlete and will affect the practices, beliefs, and actions he will make when deciding where to play college football. In addition to the above, it must also be noted that financial needs may trump racial concerns for many black and white student-athletes when making decisions on where to play collegiate football. The extent to which this occurs is beyond the scope of the present study.

This study offers a more in-depth look at the recruiting process as it relates specifically to American college football. The anticipated contributions of this study are two-fold. Empirically, this investigation contributes to the small body of literature on athletic recruiting, and on American football recruiting in particular. Of the studies that have been conducted in athletic recruiting, most have looked at the factors or attributes of school choice, as well as why those attributes are important. In addition, studies on athletic recruiting have only focused on one group (i.e., athletes), whereas this study incorporates the voices of many constituents (i.e., program administrators). My in-depth look at the recruiting process, specifically the practice of negative recruiting, provides greater insight into the role of race and class in college football recruiting in America, particularly in the South. There are also applied contributions that may result from this study in that I will be able to provide universities, athletic programs, and coaches with a richer understanding of the nature and prevalence of negative recruiting. I will also be able to offer more insight into the many different factors involved when student-athletes are faced with decisions of school choice, as well as the ways in which recruiting practices intersect with educational institutions.

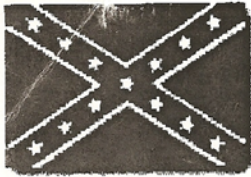
In light of this investigation, additional interviews may be undertaken with current football players at the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University, as well as other colleges and universities within the SEC to investigate the nature and prevalence of negative recruiting in the South. Future research should consider regional comparisons between intercollegiate football programs in the United States (e.g., ACC, Big 10) as well. To assess the impact of negative recruiting on school choice decisions, future research should not only include more student-athletes but attempt to reach prospective student-athletes during the recruiting season where the impact of negative recruiting on school choice is likely greatest. Speaking with student-athletes as they enter their respective institutions, prior to leaving the institutions, as well as a period of two years removed from the institution would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact the recruiting process has on school choice decisions made by student-athletes. Finally, sports programs other than football should be considered in future research endeavors involving American sports to assess whether team sports serve as a buffer to negative recruiting tactics.

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Appendix A



THE REBEL FAITHFUL Preserving the Best OLE MISS Traditions

Dear

We are so excited to have you as a part of our beloved Ole Miss. I am sure you have heard some negative talk about our "old south" beliefs, but do not worry about that, we'll see that you are taken care of once you agree to give your future to Ole Miss.

Our great university, given the name (Ole Miss) that the plantation slaves traditionally called the Lady of the house, is one of the last remaining bastions of true southern belief and culture. We have updated our public image, in order to make athletes such as yourself more comfortable, and we are confident that you will someday agree that the old ways are best.

We always make sure we have great leadership on our football team at Ole Miss in players such as Eli Manning, Bill Flowers, Doug Buckles and Justin Wade. New players such as Robert Lane, our next QB, will certainly continue this fine Ole Miss tradition. We have quite a few academy young men, but a fine boy like you will certainly be able to fit in and enjoy not having to assume the pressures of leadership. You will be able to use your talents without the intellectual pressures that may make things difficult for some types of people. We are certain you will find many players with whom you can associate.

Some of our rivals like talk about their success in graduating their players, but we are confident that your time and service to Ole Miss will serve you better than an actual degree from a lesser school. Many of your teammates will certainly become successful Doctors and Attorneys, and I'm sure you will be taken care of. Your #1 job will be to perform on the field, and to win. If you are good at that, you should not have to worry about other distractions.

we will be excited to see you suited up next fall in the ol' Red & Blue, the colors of our glorious confederate battle flag. Hody Toddy Gosh Almighty, who in the Hell are we, BIM BAM, FLIM FLAM, OLE MISS, BY DAMN!