

Angel Reese and the long legacy of racist hypocrisy in sports

written by Lev Koufax
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Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese.

The days following LSU's victory in the women's NCAA basketball championship should have been the best of Angel Reese's young life. Those days should have been packed with praise, celebration, and love.

Instead, Angel Reese was mired in attacks from a racist media and political establishment hellbent on the degradation of Black athletic excellence and exaltation of white athletic proficiency.

In the wake of her command championship performance, Reese spoke out about the racist backlash and attacks she has faced from the basketball media sphere all season. Reese commented, "All year, I was critiqued about who I was. ... I don't fit in a box that y'all want me to be in. I'm too hood. I'm too ghetto. But when other people do it, y'all say nothing."

The most incredible thing about this powerful statement is that it preceded the most intense scrutiny and attack on Reese yet. In the wake of the championship game, sports media commentators attacked Reese as "classless" because of a gesture she made towards Iowa star player Caitlin Clark at the end of the championship game.

It is true that in the waning minutes of the final tournament game, Angel Reese made John Cena's signature "now you see now you don't" gesture in Clark's direction, which entails a person waving their hand in front of their face. Reese stood by her actions, as she should. The critiques of this proud young Black woman for living her life are nothing but hollow racist attacks barely shrouded in "sportsmanship."

The reality of this double standard became even more apparent as images and videos of Clark making the same gesture in the previous two NCAA tournament games circulated on social media. However, when Clark, who is white, made the

same gesture to opponents throughout the tournament, there was no outrage. There were no accusations of classlessness. There was no great moral condemnation. That is reserved for Black athletes.

The losers in the White House

Believe it or not, the hypocrisy of the situation had not yet reached its peak. Enter Jill Biden, First Lady of the United States, on April 3, not even 24 hours after LSU's victory.

Speaking at Colorado State University, Dr. Biden declared that Caitlin Clark and the Iowa team should join LSU in the White House visit, even though they lost. The losing team has never attended the White House ceremony ever in the past.

To justify the ludicrous invitation, Biden commented, "I'm going to tell Joe I think Iowa should come [to the WHITE House] too because they played such a good game." That is an interesting perspective considering Iowa lost by 17 points. LSU shot nearly 20% better from the field than Iowa, outrebounded the Hawkeyes by 11, and registered more assists. The game was never particularly close.

For Dr. Jill Biden to speak as if Iowa played a game remotely comparable to the effort LSU gave on the floor can only be described as one thing, a joke. Angel Reese [agrees](#).

The championship game was incredible, not because it was hotly contested but because Angel Reese and her teammates put on an absolute clinic. The Tigers scored the most points in championship game history. They dominated Clark, a player many consider the best in college basketball, thanks to the outstanding defensive play of senior and veteran leader Alexis Miller. This team is exemplified by incredible competitors and young Black women making their communities and family proud.



Jack Johnson with his wife Lucille
Cameron in 1924.

The ‘Great White Hope’

That should be the focus. But, instead, Jill Biden and the entire media establishment are resolved to coddle white athletes who lose and promote age-old racist “[Great White Hope](#)” mythology. The term “Great White Hope” originated in the 1910s as a rallying cry for a boxer to defeat Jack Johnson, a Black man and heavyweight champion of the world at the time. Johnson’s marriages to white women and other personal relationships with white women were used to promote anti-Black race riots across the United States. Eventually, Johnson was prosecuted and convicted under the racist [Mann Act](#), a law used commonly to prosecute Black men involved with white women, including [Chuck Berry](#).

New York Times sports columnist William Rhoden characterized the Great White Hope phenomenon and racist double standard in a [recent article](#) discussing the attacks on Angel Reese:

“My other takeaway from the weekend is that Great White Hope-ism is gender neutral. What I’ve observed over the years is that whenever you have a white star in a sport dominated by Black athletes, the white star is swathed in extra layers of praise and adulation. This could be Christian McCaffrey in the NFL or Luka Doncic and Nikola Jokic in the NBA. Now we see it, or rather hear it, with Clark.”

The racist double standard isn’t new. White athletes are competitive. Black athletes are classless. White athletes are passionate. Black athletes are angry. White athletes are skilled. Black athletes are brutish.

Lionizing a racist bully

One only has to look at the incessant lionization of white NFL quarterback Tom Brady, even though his sideline [outbursts](#), [temper tantrums](#), and full-on [meltdowns](#) are infamous. Despite Brady's unquestioned status as a bully, the media and the NFL heap praise upon him, and not just in terms of his football prowess.

[Boston University](#) even went as far as to say that Brady's greatest achievement was his leadership, not his hall-of-fame career on the field. That's right, a globally acclaimed university holding up a bully, racist Trump supporter, and [cheater](#) as a prime example of leadership.

Meanwhile, LSU Coach Kim Mulkey, ironically, accused the South Carolina women's basketball team and their coach Dawn Staley of winning because they play like the game is a bar fight. The racist undertones of that accusation against a prominent Black woman coach and a majority Black women's team are impossible to ignore. What better way to undermine Black achievement than to invoke eugenic race tropes regarding inherent [Black physical brutality](#)?

The historical and contemporary sports landscape is littered with examples of racist hypocrisy and all forms of discrimination. Tom Brady is lionized. Caitlin Clark is coddled. Brett Favre is honored as an all-time great, despite radical right-wing politics and theft of millions from federal welfare grants.

Athletes of color, as well as those in the LGBTQ+ community, face an entirely different situation. As of this day, Colin Kaepernick is unofficially banned from the NFL for his courageous 2016 protests against police brutality. Trans collegiate swimmer Lia Thomas won an NCAA title in the women's 500-meter freestyle yet was still openly derided by fascist demagogue [Ron DeSantis](#) and his right-wing mob. After Thomas won, DeSantis declared that the second-place contestant, Emma Weyant, was the true winner. DeSantis, frothing at the mouth with anti-trans panic, asserted that Thomas' win was an affront to all women athletes and that the NCAA was fraudulent in recognizing her victory. Insanity.



Glenn Burke

Remembering Glenn Burke

Attacks on oppressed athletes can be brutal and unwavering. There is no better example of this than the story of [Glenn Burke](#), a Black baseball player in the 1970s who was also the first openly gay person to play professional baseball. Burke spent significant time in the Los Angeles Dodgers minor league system before finally breaking into the big leagues in the spring of 1976. He scuffled at times but immediately became wildly popular in the clubhouse and among the Dodgers' fan base.

For these reasons, players and fans alike were shocked when after a career-best 1977 season, Burke was traded to the Oakland Athletics just 19 games into the 1978 season. The trade made little sense at the time from a baseball perspective. Burke was young, dynamic, a terror on the base paths, and improving every day.

However, Burke was gay, and this was unacceptable to Dodgers' upper management, including bigoted manager Tommy Lasorda Sr. The trade to Oakland was the beginning of the end of Burke's career. The A's hired manager Billy Martin, a known homophobe, and racist, who introduced Burke to the team with a

homophobic slur.

It later came to the surface that the real reason Burke was traded was Lasorda's homophobia. As manager, Lasorda Sr. wielded much influence within the Dodgers' organization. Lasorda Sr. was embarrassed by rumors that Burke was actually romantically involved with his close friend and fellow gay man, Tommy Lasorda Jr., the son of the Dodgers' manager. Later, both Lasorda Jr. and Glenn Burke died from the AIDS epidemic. Before passing, Burke fell out of baseball and struggled with addiction problems. A man destroyed simply for being Black, gay, and loving the game of baseball.

This is all to say the vicious racism and sexism on display in the attacks on Angel Reese and her LSU teammates are another brutal chapter in a long history of relentless smear campaigns against prominent Black athletes.

As a movement, we must not only remember Glenn Burke, Jack Johnson, and Colin Kaepernick but also fight for and support Angel Reese, Lia Thomas, and Britney Griner as they struggle against racist media narratives and political defamation.

Black Lives Matter! Trans Lives Matter! Stand with Angel Reese!

