

Thomas Davis and the Rhetoric of Sport: A Reception Study on an  
Athlete's Positive Perspective

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## Introduction

Guilty of murder in the first degree; Aaron Hernandez, New England Patriots. Guilty of rape; Darren Sharper, New Orleans Saints. Guilty of domestic violence; Ray Rice, Baltimore Ravens. Guilty of assault; Greg Hardy, Carolina Panthers. Guilty of DUI manslaughter; Davone Bess, Cleveland Browns. Guilty of illegal use of performance enhancing drugs; Maurice Claiborne, Dallas Cowboys. Guilty of substance abuse; Josh Gordon, Cleveland Browns. The actions of these specific players and countless others who have violated the law in the past year are now responsible for creating an ever-growing, dark, looming shadow over the National Football League (NFL). The media and critics of the NFL are armed with multiple cases of NFL players' off-the-field issues, allowing for the sport to be easily and frequently bashed. The media in particular tends to highlight stories of African American athletes getting into trouble (Biber, 2015). The fact remains, "approximately 67.3% of NFL players are African American" (Lapchick, Costa, Sherrod, & Anjorin, 2012). Because of the strong African American prevalence in the NFL,

How African American athletes are viewed by society is often contingent upon the media coverage they receive. Mass media, specifically sports media, has the potential to reach large audiences through multiple mediums, thus influencing the public's view of racial stereotypes (Desmarais & Bruce, 2010).

However, there is a disparity between the small number of black sport reporters compared to the large number of black players, "with 79% of the radio and television announcers being White and 7% being Black" (Lapchick, & Sherrod, 2011). One image that the media conjures of the Black athlete is, "of brute strength, violence, and low

mental ability, while the White athlete is more intellectually advanced” (Carrington, 2010). Overall, the media plays a large role in shaping the way people view the sport of football and the men in it.

These sport reporters portray NFL players as physical specimens. According to Coakley, Hallinan, and McDonald (2011), physical prowess, particularly in sports such as football and basketball, has become a distinguishing characteristic of African American athletes. Moreover the media portrays NFL players as extremely egotistical; athletes are frequently stereotyped as being self-centered, arrogant, and selfish, but with innate athletic abilities (Denham, Billings, & Halone, 2002; Girdwood, 2010). The media also scrutinizes masculine sports such as football, and the negative effects they have on homosexual athletes (LaFica, 2015). However, the public has to recognize that these stories are not representative of what generally happens in the sports community, but are merely an aspect of some matter that athletes may possibly face (Coakley, 2011). Sports media has always seen its fair share of personal opinions, however when a majority of sports media reports have the same judgment on issues within the NFL, a question has to be asked as to what is going on. Media types are entitled to their own personal tastes,

Or in this case, personal distaste as to what the once-proud NFL has become. An inability to look at a gay player on ability-based grounds. Domestic violence. A culture that breeds contempt of the law, judging from the number of players who run afoul of it (Chimelis, R. 2014).

The media and sport reporters love to report these destructive behavior stories, which leaves the audience with a biased view of the NFL, and more specifically, the men in the league.

Despite all the negative press constantly surrounding the NFL, Thomas Davis, the 2014 Walter Payton Man of the Year Award Winner, took advantage of a negative rhetorical situation to deliver a call to action to the NFL and its players. This in-prompt-to-authentic speech gave the media and sports reporters something new to look at. For the first time in awhile, the media was given something positive to talk about the NFL and an African American athlete. Davis stepped up in front of everyone and was the first player to make a significant call to action for the NFL players to take charge and help change the league's negative perception. In doing this, Davis not only gave the media and sports reporters something positive to talk about, he opened a new door for scholars within the rhetoric of sport field to positively critique sports and athlete testimonials.

Before breaking down Davis's speech, it is important to understand why we need to study the rhetoric of sport. First off,

In the field of sports communication, a wide variety of rhetoric techniques are used to sell, to entertain and to inform its audience. These techniques are present in visual, audio, and written platforms and each channel must appeal to a specific audience through differing uses of ethos, pathos, and logos (Boshears 2015).

How we view a sport is largely contingent upon what is said or written about the sport. Some of the central themes rhetoric of sport scholars tend to look at are hegemonic masculinity, print and broadcast media, and language uses and practices (Fuller, 2006). Rhetoric of sport dissects what goes on behind the scenes of sports and examines how sports affect our everyday society. Given how prevalent sports are in American culture it is extremely important to study the rhetoric of sport to uncover how sports function in

shaping our society (Fenske, 2008). However, similarly to the media, the rhetoric of sport field produces a significant number of articles that focus on the negative aspects of sports.

Many rhetoric of sport articles focus on racism, specifically, African Americans role in sports and how they have the tendency to become involved in criminal activity (Biber, 2015; Carrington, 2010; Sciullo, 2015). We also see articles being written about violent sports and their association with violence against women (Fenske, 2008; Olson, 2002). A lot of rhetoric of sport articles negatively look at gender bias and homophobia in male sports (Carrol, 2010; LaFica, 2015). There are many more instances of the rhetoric of sport field highlighting negative aspects of sports', with that being said, more study within the rhetoric of sport field needs to be done on the positive aspects of sports. Because of how predominant sports are in our culture, it is hard to believe that everything we take away from sports is negative. By studying more of the positive aspects within rhetoric of sport and the media, scholars can uncover more information as to why sports are so influential on our culture. This is precisely why Thomas Davis's speech is so important, in that it forces scholars within the rhetoric of sport field and sports media to look at the positive dimension of sports and athlete testimonials.

With Davis providing a positive twist on how to write about the rhetoric of sport, the best way to critique Davis's emotional speech is by using reception studies. By using reception studies scholars will be able to highlight the immediate effect the speech had on the audience, NFL fans, and the media. Some of the main concepts that will be used when analyzing reception studies are audience reception, authenticity, and the use of a powerful metaphor within a speech. Furthermore, by critiquing Davis's speech, scholars

will receive new material on how the rhetoric of sport can be written in the positive dimension.

### **Reception Studies and Authenticity**

Reception studies have a wide variety of uses. One may use reception studies to further understand a speech, text, or artifact. As stated by Hardwick, “The function of reception studies is to analyze and compare the linguistic, theatrical and contextual aspects of the speech. Each has its own reception history and requires appropriate methods of investigation” (pp.1-2). Reception studies can often be used when a speech or artifact generates a strong or unexpected response. The processes in reception and production are similar in that they both involve the acquisitions of forms and meanings, as well as the mappings between them (Keenan and MacWhinney, 1987). All speeches generate different meanings and when an unexpected response occurs, scholars usually examine the audience to determine what made the rhetorical event different.

Audience studies asked how people converge and diverse in making sense of media texts, how people respond critically to dominant messages, and how audiences participate in civil society. Today, in a networked moment of multimodal and user-generated media, similar questions arise about practices of reading, writing, and interpretation, and about the consequences of such practices for inclusion or exclusion, acceptance or critique (Livingston, 2013, p.1).

Mainly, analyzing the audience is critical in understanding how the messages were received and how the audience was able to make sense of those messages to ultimately

come to their conclusions about the message. Once scholars have identified key aspects of the audience they can go onto further critique the artifact. With that being said, “The audience’s interpretive activity is essential because it is in the process of audience reception that media texts acquire their full meaning” (Croteau and Hoynes 2003).

Speeches generate different responses from audiences, which is why scholars within the rhetoric of sport field should rely on reception studies as their main method to uncover significance of successful rhetorical speeches.

Scholars should attempt to use reception studies more often to critique an emotionally moving speech, in doing so they can relate the trajectories in audience reception research to the specific speech. “Livingstone identifies six trajectories in audience reception research. She argues that each of these trajectories advocates a central concept” (Zaid, 2014, p.287). One of the main trajectories of audience reception is Hall’s paired concepts of encoding and decoding. Hall’s focus is on the empirical examination of the process of understanding and interpreting media texts. Hall states that,

the degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the ‘personifications’, encoder/producer and decoder/receiver (Hall, 1980, p. 131).

Based on who delivers the speech, the decoder (audience), will attempt to make sense of what is being said. Every audience member will interpret the communicative texts differently; however, when a majority of the audience has the same interpretation of the



speech, scholars often attempt to seek why that happened. This leads scholars to analyze the model reader.

In this trajectory, scholars dismantle the dominant screen theory tradition and the introduction of the concept of the “model reader”. Livingstone states that, “with this conception of the text and reader as mutually defining, literary or high culture theories were applied to the study of popular culture, asking specifically about the relation between model and actual audiences” (Livingstone, 1998, p. 240). By establishing the relationship between the speaker and audience, researchers can gain a better understanding of how audiences can come to the same conclusion about a speaker’s message. The next step for scholars is to analyze the moment at which the speech is delivered to better understand its reception.

Livingstone argues that the ethnographic turn, “shifts the focus away from the moment of textual interpretation towards the contextualization of that moment” (Livingstone, 1998, p.240). By critiquing the moment at which the speech was given scholars can make sense of why a speech generated a certain reception. After going through these steps in the reception studies method, scholars will often look at the authenticity of the speech.

So often, speeches are given and they sound inauthentic, strictly PR moves, or rehearsed discourses that are intended to make the speaker look better. However, when a speech sounds authentic it has the ability to move an audience emotionally. What exactly is the criteria for an authentic rhetorical artifact? Scholars have gone back and forth on what true authenticity is. Judith Buendgens-Kosten states,

authenticity is related to notions of ‘realness’ or ‘trueness to origin’. As a technical term in the field of Elaboration Likelihood Theory (ELT), authenticity has been used to characterize texts (both written and spoken), learning material, tasks, cultural artifacts, multimedia products, forms of assessment, and even types of teacher and audience (p.457).

Authenticity has two major aspects, namely, “text and task authenticity.” In language-teaching contexts, “the notion of ‘authenticity’ was mainly applied at first to texts (spoken or written), characterizing a quality of the language used in them or the provenance of the texts themselves” (p.457). In the late 1970s, however, Widdowson introduced a distinction between authenticity, as it applies to texts viewed in isolation (which he called genuineness).

Widdowson’s use of the term “genuineness” described authenticity as, “a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response” (Widdowson, 1978, p. 80). According to this distinction, a text is authentic if it is a,

genuine instance of discourse, designed to meet a communicative purpose, directed at people playing their roles in a normal social context as opposed to a contrivance for teaching language. Authenticity is present if a text is used in ways that correspond to [...] normal communicative activities (Widdowson, 1978, p. 80).

Genuineness is not irrelevant, but “making genuineness correspond with authenticity is referred to as a desired aim” (Widdowson, 1979, p. 169). Depending partly on the definition employed, different types of claims have been made about the relationship

between authenticity and language learning.

In this age of globalization and computer-mediated communication, authenticity remains an important, though critically debated, notion; “Its adaptability to different contexts—from textbook design to telecollaboration—and to different aspects of language learning contributes to occasional confusion in its use as a technical term” (Buendgens-Kosten, 2013, p.459). When using reception studies to critique an artifact it is extremely important for scholars to look at the audiences’ reception, as well as the authenticity of the speaker, in order to come to a valid conclusion of the rhetorical significance of a speech.

### **Rhetorical Situation**

In 2014, the NFL was under the medias microscope with a whirlwind of player conduct problems. With each passing day more and more articles were being written about how bad the players in the NFL are, the scandals these players were committing, and the leagues all-around negative reputation (Baker, 2014). It was at this point, at the forefront of catastrophe, that Thomas Davis took advantage of this negative situation to create a powerful and moving speech in an attempt to bring some positive attention to the NFL. When the NFL was in need of a hero, one man stood at the center of chaos and created such a praiseworthy artifact, that further studying and analysis had to be done. Not only does this speech give rhetoric of sport scholars a new piece of material to critique, it also helps readers understand the power of authenticity. This is accomplished in the way this speech was able to generate such an emotional and encouraging response within the moment.

The specific rhetorical situation for the NFL at the time of the speech was right after NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell, was scrutinized for how he had handled the punishments for these illegal activities: the Aaron Hernandez murder, concussions, Deflategate, and the domestic violence case against Ray Rice; all leading to the NFL and Goodell receiving copious amounts of damaging critiques about the players and their destructive behaviors (Levine, 2016; Rose, 2015). Many kids and fans look up to these players and idolize them for their on-the-field play. However, when they are involved in illegal or criminal activity, it casts an unwarranted spotlight over what kind of men these NFL players really are. The league's current situation demanded someone to step up and attempt to make a difference.

This courageous rhetorical speech took place on January 31, 2015, at the Phoenix Convention Center. NFL Honors is a special event held the day before the Super Bowl to crown the league's highest achievers and best players of the season. In the words of *Sports Illustrated* writer Jenny Vrentas,

Thomas Davis didn't play in Super Bowl XLIX, but the Carolina Panthers linebacker still made an impact on Super Bowl weekend. On the eve of the big game, Davis received the NFL's Walter Payton Man of the Year Award, and used his platform to send a message to the players around the NFL.

On this particular night, one speech, and one moment, stood as the most significant call to action delivered by an NFL player in the last few years. Davis took the stage to accept the 2014 Walter Payton Man of the Year Award, which is the only league honor that recognizes a player's off-the-field community service, as well as his playing excellence

(Dragon, 2015). The Walter Payton award dates back to the 1970's and has been recognized as one of the most coveted honors a player can receive.

Davis took to the podium well dressed, clean cut, and emotional. The speech took place in a giant convention center filled to capacity with some of the most recognized men in football. As Davis walked up to the stage, the crowd applauded, and there was uplifting, symphony-style music playing in the background as he approached the podium. All eyes were on the 32-year-old Davis, a 6 ft 1, 235-pound linebacker. Davis was well dressed in a very dapper all white tuxedo with a black and white poka-dotted button up shirt underneath his white blazer. Davis definitely looked like a credible, successful, confident man when he took to the podium.

### **Analysis of Davis's Speech**

After watching countless players come up and give short, unimpressible speeches, Davis blew fans away with his poise, soft-spoken words, and emotional appeal. Davis's passion to help underprivileged children made more sense after the audience and fans around the world watched the video that featured Davis's tough upbringing, which played right before he took to the stage to receive his award. In the video, Davis talks about some of his shortcomings growing up; for example: how he had to boil water on the stove just to take a hot bath and he described how he would have to run an extension cord all the way from his neighbor's house just to have a single light in the run-down shack he was living in. As the video continues playing, Davis talks about the Christmas holiday and how when he was younger he would expect that Santa was going to bring everybody gifts and toys. A younger Davis was excited in anticipation of new toys to

play with, but when he woke there was never a single gift for him and his siblings every Christmas. Davis said he blamed himself for it and wondered if he really was that bad of a kid.

The emotional video recapping Davis's tough past moved the immediate audience when describing all the struggles Thomas had to go through growing up. Even for viewers at home, the video created an emotional and humbling response to how Davis was able to overcome such unfortunate circumstances. This video helped viewers who had never heard of Thomas Davis before get some valuable insight into the type of man Davis really is. In the last part of the video, Davis talks about the community stepping up and being a village of people who looked out for him once he was left alone in rural Georgia. His reference to this village-like community was made clear when he explained how everyone in his town pitched in to make sure Davis was fed, clothed, and able to participate in athletics. After watching this video recapping the struggle filled life Davis grew up in, it was hard not to tear up after hearing such an emotional story, then seeing such a successful man walking up to the stage after overcoming so much. This video was able to give an even deeper meaning to what Davis had to say in his speech, as well as helping him build authenticity and credibility within the moment.

The video that played before Davis took to the stage prepped the immediate audience and viewers around the world with a brief background of why Davis was the 2014 Walter Payton Man of the Year. Thomas benefited enhanced credibility within the moment after the video played; he then created his own authenticity by humbly thanking God for how amazing he is and how amazing he has been in Davis's life. He continued to

thank all the people who have helped him get to where he is today; in doing this Davis acknowledged that he could not have made it to where he is today on his own. This continued to enhance his authentic spirit within the moment as a modest man who is extremely humble and thankful to have such great people backing him.

Thomas Davis's peak credibility building moment happened when he began to thank his wife, Kelly Davis, for being there for him through all he has gone through. At this point Davis begins to choke up and become very emotional. As Davis begins to tear up you can feel the mood and atmosphere of the speech beginning to shift. As the camera highlights members in the audience you can see several people holding back tears, while watching Davis speak with undivided attention and appreciation. This is a crucial spot where scholars look at authenticity and its role in generating a significant and moving speech. When Davis makes the sudden switch from a humble thank you speech to a call to action for the guys in the NFL, you can see the passion and authenticity in his eyes and his words. Davis began to preach what he has been practicing his whole life.

Thomas Davis's authentic, heartfelt, moving speech, was driven home at the peak of his authenticity when he delivered an invigorating impromptu call to action. Davis explained later in a post award ceremony interview:

It really was an on the spot thing. It wasn't rehearsed or thought up. I was just speaking from the heart. In sitting there looking at the video [during the presentation], thinking about the words that I said about the way I grew up, and what it took to really mold me into the man that I am, I just focused on that (Smith, 2015).

As Davis explained to reporters, his speech came from the heart and was completely “on the spot.” Part of the reason Davis’s speech was so powerful and had such a large impact was how authentic and genuine it appeared. The audience did not only hear Thomas Davis’s speech, they felt it. This was accomplished by the genuine delivery in which Davis used his tone, body language, and emotional appeal.

As previously mentioned, Davis began his speech in the normal award ceremony fashion by thanking God and everyone who helped him get to this point in his life. It was not until after Davis thanked his wife and became emotional and teary-eyed that he switched the tone and mood of the speech. He proceeded to clear his throat, collect his composure, and delivered his powerful call to action:

To the guys in this league, I just want to say to you, let's take charge. Dare to be different. We are a village. Let's step up and be a village of guys that make a difference. Let's change this world. We're well compensated for what we do. Let's show these kids how much we care about them. Let's give the media something positive to talk about instead of bashing our league.

Davis begins by first addressing the men in the NFL to take charge. At this point of the speech the entire room was full of current and retired NFL players, in doing this Davis immediately grabbed a majority of the immediate audience’s attention. Next, Davis challenged them to dare to be different. These words, although somewhat cliché, when coming from the mouth of a humble, vulnerable man, made a lasting impact on the overall main theme of his message, which was for the NFL to be a village of guys that step up and make a difference. Despite players in the venue being from different teams, backgrounds, and ethnicities, Davis saw the men in the room as one collective village of



men who all co-exist and are dependent on one another. This village metaphor holds every player accountable for the perception and reputation the NFL has.

Thomas Davis wanted to use the metaphor of a village to show everyone in the NFL that they are not all a group of individuals, rather a band of brothers, who as a whole are the sole factor in creating the reputation of what the players in the NFL are seen as. In a post-show interview Davis commented, “I thought about, if we got together as a group of players, and did it in a village type style, and gave back to the community, and gave back to the kids, we could change this world and make a difference” (Smith, 2015). Davis in his heart truly believes that the men in the NFL have the power and resources to make a significant difference in the world. This is made clear by the last part of Davis’s call to action.

At the end of the speech, Davis exclaims, “we are well compensated for what we do” (Davis, 2015). In saying this, Davis calls them to use their money for something more than personal benefit. NFL players collectively made \$3.6 billion in 2014 and the average NFL player salary is \$2.11 million dollars (Gaines, 2015). With that kind of money, Davis understands that the guys in the NFL could be doing more for their communities and be doing more as a whole to better the league’s negative reputation.

Lastly, Davis tells the players to show the kids and fans of the NFL how much they really care, and to give the media something positive to talk about instead of always bashing the league. With these two closing statements Davis drives home the key point of his call to action. Davis had this to say about his heartfelt message:

I hope to motivate guys that are doing things to do more. And the guys who are not doing anything, step up and let's do something. Because we are a powerful league, and we can make a difference, and we do have a huge voice, and it's all about us using that voice in the right way (Smith, 2015).

Davis understands how powerful and popular the NFL is and that he and all the players have a huge opportunity to use their platform to give back to the community. Davis continuously uses the words "we" and continues to constitute the NFL as one giant "village" of well-paid men who can have a greater impact on the world by doing more in their communities, showing the kids how much they really care, and giving the media something positive to talk about.

The main take away from Davis's heartwarming speech is his metaphor about the NFL being a village. Having grown up in a village-like environment, Davis's credibility for making that statement was beyond justified. Metaphors are not just a literary flourish used by those with a poetic turn of mind, but a fundamental tool that has been used by humans from the earliest times to shape thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The power of metaphors has been recognized throughout our societies history: which, is why Davis's village metaphor was so powerful. As Lumby and English (2010) stated, "they have the power to help us create meaning and understanding and to improve how we lead" (p. 2). With this powerful metaphor intertwined with Davis's emotionally moving speech it is easy to see why the speech received such a positive reception.

### **Reception of Davis's Speech**

Thomas Davis's heartwarming speech received an overwhelming positive reception from the immediate audience, sports writers, and fans of the NFL. Many of the reviews about Davis's speech occurred right after his speech and later that evening after the entire award ceremony. And to the surprise of many, on Super Bowl Sunday the next day, many more articles, tweets, and commentaries were made in response to Davis's speech rather than talking about the big game.

Since the venue in which Davis gave his speech was full of NFL players the first aspect of reception studies scholars usually analyze is the immediate audience. Right after Davis finished making his call to action the camera began to highlight members of the crowd. The camera was able to capture authentic and raw snap shots of several NFL players faces after the speech. The first player the camera flashed to as Davis finished his speech was New Orleans Saints quarterback, Drew Brees. In this brief snapshot a teary-eyed Brees is applauding with a sincere expression on his face as he looks directly at Davis. The significance of Drew Brees being highlighted immediately after the speech is that he is starting quarterback for the biggest rival of Davis's Carolina Panthers. Brees plays Davis's team twice a year and has personally played against Davis over ten times. Watching a player applaud and appreciate a rival player's testimonial speaks volumes about the authenticity of Thomas Davis's speech and proves how powerful his message was to everyone in the crowd.

Next, the camera flashes to J.J. Watt, the reigning Defensive Player of the Year, who is known for his motivational speeches and exceptional work ethic. Watt is one of

the most respected and adored players the NFL has ever seen. In this snapshot, Watt has a smirk on his face and is applauding Davis, looking proudly at Davis for the message he just gave. To have such a big-name player responding to Davis's message the way Watt did, it is clear to see how the entire audience must have positively received Davis's message. This is evident in the next camera shot; in the background of Watt you can see the entire crowd applauding with their eyes glued on Davis and we see a woman in the background stand up as she gives Davis a standing ovation.

Following that last cut the camera pans back to Davis who tries to continue speaking but is halted as the roar of applause from the crowd blows him away. The camera pans back out to the crowd and highlights Davis's head coach, Ron Rivera and Davis's wife Kelly, who are smiling ear-to-ear joining in on the standing ovation with the entire crowd. Davis clutches his heart, steps back, and puts his hand over his mouth in disbelief. A teary-eyed Davis then looks out into the entire crowd and humbly embraces an over twenty second standing ovation! With the entire room on their feet applauding and commemorating Davis's speech it is obvious to see how the immediate audience positively received his authentic address.

The media instantaneously began to write about Davis's powerful speech. As ESPN sports writer David Newton explained:

There were tears. There was a challenge to dare to be great. There was an embrace with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. If you didn't know what Carolina Panthers outside linebacker Thomas Davis was all about before Saturday night, you did after watching him receive the Walter Payton Man of the Year

Award at the fourth annual NFL Honors awards show (Newton, 2015).

Newton went on to explain more about Davis's tough upbringing and injury struggles he faced throughout his NFL career in his post-speech article. He noted that Davis is the only player to successfully return to the NFL after tearing the Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) three times on the same knee. That brief note highlighted Davis's resiliency and passion for the game, increasing the perception of Davis's character even more. Newton's media article highlighted Davis's positive attitude and recapped his emotional speech.

Similarly, Justin Streight agreed with Newton, explaining:

Carolina Panthers linebacker Thomas Davis knows how to give a heart-wrenching speech. He received the 2014 Walter Payton Man of the Year award at the *NFL Honors* show Saturday in Phoenix. Standing feet away from embattled NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, Davis called on the NFL to make a positive difference in the world (Streight, 2015).

This media article once again highlighted Davis's emotional speech and also pointed out the negative situation the league was in at the time. More specifically, Streight wrote about the negative reception the commissioner had received, which led to his conclusion, stating, "Hopefully, Thomas Davis' speech will mark a new beginning for the NFL" (Streight, 2015). Clearly, this sports reporter felt the positive call to action Davis made. In his article he reiterated Davis's call for the players to do more and attempt to draw more positive attention to the NFL.

Another member of the media, Rana Cash, also wrote about the impact of Davis's heartwarming speech: writing, "Thomas Davis did more than win an award Saturday night. He captivated the hearts and if we're lucky, the imagination of every player in

attendance to applaud him as the recipient of the NFL's Walter Payton Man of the Year Award” (Cash, 2015). Cash highlighted the effects of Davis’s speech on the players and reiterated Davis’s message about the players stepping up as a village of guys who do more to help out their communities. She also explained:

Davis, founder of the Thomas Davis Defending Dreams Foundation and devoted contributor to his community, brought the crowd to tears with his acceptance speech that followed a video chronicling his extremely humble upbringing in tiny Shellman, Ga (Cash, 2015).

Cash, like many other members of the media, talked about Davis’s emotional speech and the effect it had on the crowd. This is another instance of a member of the media highlighting the authenticity of Davis’s heartfelt words and the impact of his speech. She also understands that Davis’s message was not just for the NFL players, ending her article saying: “We should give Davis thanks, too, for challenging us all to be better” (Cash, 2015). Thomas Davis’s speech not only impacted the media and players of the NFL, it also sent out an uplifting message to the fans of the NFL.

The reception of an artifact or a speech does not have to look only at the immediate audience to determine how successful an artifact was. By looking at social media scholars can determine if the artifact was able to reach a mass audience beyond the immediate one, therefore heightening the importance of critically analyzing the speech. One fan, Bonnie Laberta, tweeted, “Great speech. Had me in tears.” Similarly, another fan, Christine Golic, tweeted, “Thomas Davis’s Walter Payton Man of the Year Award speech was amazing. Terrific message!!” These two responses are only a snippet of the overwhelmingly encouraging tweets on social media about Davis’s speech. These

responses further emphasize how this speech created such an authentic and touching response within the moment that even fans who were not in the immediate audience felt the impact of Davis's speech.

In another social media tweet, Bob Snipes wrote, "TD is what we call down here a DGD (damn good dawg)! And I loved his message tonight." It is clear to see that Bob felt Davis's speech was genuine and authentic even though he was not in the venue.

Likewise, Jen Epperly tweeted, "LOVE that it went to a non household name. God bless him, his wife, and all they do!!! #humbleandgrateful." By recognizing Davis as a non-household name, Jen clearly understands that his credibility, genuine attitude, and strong words were meant for a greater purpose other than glorifying himself.

In using reception studies to reflect on the main themes of Davis's speech it is clear to see that not only was the immediate audience moved, the fans and media were also believers in Davis. In using reception studies one can identify aspects of a speech that resonated with a majority of people, then use those key parts to come up with a valid conclusion about the speech. Based on the reception Davis received it is clear that a majority of people believed his speech to be authentic and did not see it as insincere or strictly PR/marketing move to enhance his personal image. Using reception studies to critique Davis's speech, one can understand how he was able to make such a bold claim, while at the same time sounding so humble and genuine. The fact that Davis was a relatively no-name-player until he received the award speaks volumes about the type of man Thomas is. On this huge awards night plenty of big-name-players had the opportunity to make a call to action; however, it was the small time, Thomas Davis, who stepped up and used his credibility within the moment and underprivileged upbringing

story to deliver such an authentic speech.

### **Conclusion**

By critically analyzing Thomas Davis's impromptu to call to action using the reception studies method, scholars can see how this speech is a significant rhetorical artifact. Looking at the positive reception the speech was able to generate within the moment was the first aspect of identifying the speech as significant. The speech then became worth studying when looking at the secondary reception of the media and fans of the NFL. Once there were over three different avenues of reception to look at, scholars can see that this speech needed to be further analyzed in order to uncover what made three different groups respond so positively to Davis's message.

Once scholars look into Davis's speech, they can begin to uncover the importance Davis's genuine and authentic words. By looking at the dimensions of authenticity and comparing them to Davis's speech, it was clear to see how closely they aligned. This was backed up by the positive responses the audience, media, and fans gave Davis shortly after the speech. By critically analyzing what makes a speech authentic and using that criteria to critique Davis's speech it was clear to see how Thomas Davis made believers in everyone who heard him that night.

Next, by breaking down the contextual aspects of Davis's speech scholars can pinpoint the exact moment in which Davis made an impact on the audience, media, and fans. In looking at the words Davis used in his call to action, scholars could identify how each word played a significant role in captivating the minds and hearts of everyone watching. This was made clear by looking at the reactions of the immediate audience after each line of Davis's speech. Next, by looking at all the articles the media wrote about Davis's



speech, scholars could identify the common trends amongst the media regurgitating his main points and his metaphor about the NFL being a village. Furthermore, looking at the fans' reception on social media in response to Davis's speech, scholars could see the main theme of Davis's speech that resonated with so many.

In delivering this speech, Thomas Davis stepped up and used his unique platform to create a significant rhetorical artifact. This speech not only touched the hearts of viewers around the world, it gave rhetoric of sport scholars a new, positive form of material to critique. This speech recognized the incredible opportunity NFL players have to make a difference in this world and to really give back to a country in dire need of positive role models. In our society we are so frequently exposed to people who accomplish great things, yet do nothing more for anyone else beside themselves. Davis is a true hero and role model. He is a man who not only uses his money for good, but is a man who is courageous enough to stand up in front of all his peers and demand more from them as not only football players but as men.

With a speech like Davis's, hopefully more players will begin to model after his actions and truly began to make an impact on this world, beyond their athletic prowess on the field. For all the money these men make, they truly have all the supremacy, resources and platform to make a difference within their communities. In making these changes, the NFL can finally be viewed in a positive light, media and sports reporters will have more positive things to talk about NFL players, and lastly, rhetoric of sport scholars can have more material like Davis's speech to use as a way to show the positive aspects of sports. This speech was meaningful and influential on so many levels. With how predominant sports are in American culture, scholars desperately need more material like Davis's

speech to critique, analyze, and breakdown what makes sports so popular in our culture. With a speech like Thomas Davis's it is obvious to see why so many fans adore football and the players because there are good men in the NFL who do have a voice. We just do not get to hear about them as often as we should. With this speech Davis made a call to action to everyone in the NFL to step up and be a village of guys who change this world and generate more positive material for people to use to talk about the NFL and its players. With this one speech, Thomas Davis has exposed the world to a new type of way to look at the professional African American athlete. In doing so, Davis has shown the benefits of using the reception studies method to uncover aspects of a speech that make it significant, as well as the how important the role of authenticity is. Lastly, Thomas Davis opened a door for more people to take advantage of the giant platforms they are given to do more for others and the community rather than glorifying themselves in the spotlight. Thomas Davis is a role model, an inspiration, and a symbol of hope for the future in the way we look at men in sports.

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