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Three student athletes who are different but equal

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For the Daily News

A WALK ACROSS campus is enough to provoke a quizzical stare or a few turned heads, and in some instances elicit a silent nod in their direction. They feel it. They know. It's a reverse world that these college athletes experience each time they go into a classroom or step into a sports realm. They take a look around and discover that the only face like theirs is the one they wake up and see each morning in the mirror.

Lincoln University's Britny Adams and Cheyney University's Anthony Manerchia and Brad Engle frequently are asked: "What are you doing here?" or "Why do you go there?"

"It's funny, it's like you can't win," said Engle, a 6-2, 230-pound linebacker who started six games this season for the 0-11 Wolves. "I got asked that question here at Cheyney, and all the time by my friends at home."

Adams, Manerchia and Engle do stand out - they're part of a small world of white student/athletes who attend what are called Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU), where the student body is predominantly black. For the trio, there was an adjustment process: They are getting used to their surroundings while the other students are getting used to them.

But the commonality among them is that they have found sports as a key avenue to acceptance, to hurdle racial barriers, which is significant at this time with the first African-American U.S. president taking office last week.

Each is a freshman. Adams plays for the Lincoln women's basketball team, coming off the bench. Engle started six games before suffering an ACL tear in his left knee in the eighth game of the season, and Manerchia is a local product out of Chichester High who played special teams for the Wolves and saw a bit of time near the end of the season as a wide receiver.

They had other choices, but they are grateful to experience a different culture and receive an education in and out of the classroom.

Britny Adams didn't know Lincoln University, nestled in bucolic Chester County and a straight ride down Route 1 South, was an HBCU. So when she and her mother visited the campus last October, it came as a surprise. But it didn't deter Adams from going there.

Adams, a 5-8 guard, was originally recruited by Lincoln softball coach Christopher Cummings without seeing her play. She chose Lincoln over a Christian school, accepting a full scholarship. It's a 12-hour drive from her home in Bloomingdale, Mich., a rural community with a multiracial population of roughly 500, where the center of town is a blinking red light and everyone knows everyone on a first-name basis. Her graduating class at Bloomingdale High had 60 students.

Meanwhile, Lincoln's ethnic profile of the more than 2,500 students who attend school there this fall is 1.5 percent white. Blacks accounted for almost 92.5 percent of the student population.

During Adams' first week at Lincoln, someone approached her in the cafeteria and thought she was lost, asking, "Do you go here?"

"I was known as the 'white girl,' " Adams said, laughing. "I didn't take any offense to it. I just laughed. My parents were definitely nervous about me going to Lincoln, but more so because I'm 12 hours away from home and I didn't know anyone out here. My teammates are very aware that I'm white, because they joke that I haven't tasted greens yet.

"You can't be sensitive. I hear things during games, like 'That white girl can shoot.' But I also have fun with people, too. I get asked all the time, 'What made you come to Lincoln?' I answer them, 'Why, because I'm white.' It's funny to see people's reactions. They don't know how to react to me."

Certainly she has adjusted on the court, averaging 4.6 points and 1.1 rebounds in 11 games. She is shooting .414 percent on three-pointers.

Lincoln is 2-16 in its second year of making the transition from a Division III to Division II school, under fifth-year coach Andy Haman.

Dianthia Ford-Kee, Lincoln's director of athletics, says one of her goals has been to encourage staff to recruit non-black athletes.

"It has a lot to do with your being able to sell your product," she said, touting the school's attractive campus and diverse staff as attributes that assist in recruiting. "That sends a message that there is inclusion here, and I think that's going to cause us to increase our, what I would say here at Lincoln, our minority participation."

Of course, Ford-Kee points out, the process has to start with a visit rather than just an Internet search. "They see that our campus is so diverse, and once they experience Lincoln, they find that it's just another college that affords opportunity," she said.

In the short time Adams has been at Lincoln, she has absorbed something invaluable. In her opinion, 10 or 15 years ago it might have been inconceivable for a white girl from the Midwest to choose Lincoln, and it might not have been widely accepted by her hometown peers.

With the election President Obama, Adams said she believes that certainly indicates how attitudes have changed today.

"African-Americans have gone through their entire lives being minorities, what's the big deal in experiencing what many African-Americans have gone through, being 'the only one'?" Adams asked. "I'm very comfortable here at Lincoln. It didn't take long to be accepted and fully welcomed here, and you learn it's not a race thing, it's an acceptance thing. The experience of going to an all-black school ultimately puts me ahead. The way I see it, I'll experience what most white Americans never will, and that's the perspective of being a minority. Experiencing other races and cultures can only help you grow."

Anthony Manerchia and Brad Engle couldn't be more opposite. Manerchia is an introverted 180-pound receiver, and Engle an extrovert you can see and hear a mile away. But they do have one thing in common: They are the only white players on Cheyney's football team. Like Lincoln, it's a campus where whites make up about 2 percent of the student body.

Manerchia, a 2008 Chichester grad, attends Cheyney on a Keystone Academic scholarship. He experienced the same type of feeling as Adams in his first few weeks on Cheyney's campus. He felt the stares, the wary eyes and saw the whispers as he walked by.

"At first, most people on campus knew me as 'the white guy on the football team,' " Manerchia said. "There is a trust that has to be built. Walking around campus, you feel like people are looking at you, wondering what I'm doing here, and you see people talking. It is different being one of the few whites here. During football practice, that all changed. Everything is the same, where everyone does what they do."

There is no race on a football field.

"I don't think so, no," Manerchia said. "I get joked around a lot by my friends about going to Cheyney, because I'm the white kid going to an all-black school. Me and Brad joke back and forth that we're the 'crackers' on the team. From the other players on the team, you might hear that 'You're pretty good for a white guy,' or 'You're pretty fast for a white guy,' or 'No white guy can jump that high.' I just laugh it off and tell them, 'I didn't know we could do that, either.' "

But the bottom line is . . . "Black people aren't that different than white people," Manerchia said. "I think that's what I've learned most about this experience. Both races make the wrong assumptions about each other."

Engle was one of only two white players on his York High football team. His best friend, Keith Smith, is on the Cheyney team. There is still some discomfort, he says, like when he's sitting in African-American history class and the subject is slavery or transgressions against blacks by whites during certain periods in U.S. history.

"It does make you feel a little awkward, you feel some stares your way, because you're the only white kid in the class and some of the other kids think it's your fault those things happened," Engle said. "We have a few guys on our team who are a little ignorant about race, thinking I started because I was white. But I can't do anything about that. Ignorance is ignorance. It doesn't matter what color you are."

Engle feels he has the best of both worlds, even if it means having to explain his decision to students at Cheyney who wonder why he's there and to friends back home in York who ask what it's like going to an all-black school.

"I mean, I'm here getting an education and playing football," Engle said. "You can't beat that. Barack Obama being elected president just shows race isn't as much of an issue as people think, both white and black." *

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