

Why Are Successful Black Men Assumed to Be Athletes or Entertainers?¹

By Michael Mechanic

I have an amateur musician friend, Mark Montgomery French, who is without question a card-carrying nerd. He also happens to be Black, *six-foot-nine*, and has zero interest in sports. Every week for the past three decades, since he reached adult height, Mark tells me in an email, “a total stranger would ask me the same four-word question. It’s practically a script.”

He proceeds to write out the script:

EXT. STREET — DAY

MARK is standing on a street corner, minding his own business. Suddenly we see GENERIC EVERYPERSON approach him from the front, looking up at MARK’s height in amazement, mouth opening in slo-mo as a question stumbles out of it.

GENERIC EVERYPERSON (**beatifically**) (*delighted*): Do you play basketball?

MARK (neutral, but like so over this): No I do not.

GENERIC EVERYPERSON (confused, with a hint of hostility): What? Why? If I were your height I’d play all the time! Yadda-yadda-yadda Michael Jordan yadda-yadda-yadda high school coach yadda-yadda-yadda basketball-specific reference that I assume you understand . . .

MARK (totally checked out): Uh-huh. Uh-huh. That’s nice. Uh-huh.

GENERIC EVERYPERSON (still rolling): Yadda-yadda-yadda Are your kids tall?

¹ Michael Mechanic, “[Why Are Successful Black Men Assumed to Be Athletes or Entertainers?](#),” *Mother Jones*, October 18, 2021.

FADE OUT

Mark has made a good living for himself as the creative director for various marketing and tech firms, where he is **invariably** (*always*) the company's first Black creative director. At one job, he befriended a white colleague an inch taller than he is. "None of the above has ever happened to him," Mark told me.