

Untangling the WNBA's Kalani Brown-Liz Cambage hair incident and its complex aftermath



By Tamryn Spruill (author/tamryn-spruill/) Jul 12, 2019



When Liz Cambage's arm became intertwined in Kalani Brown's hair on June 27, a hair-pulling and shoving incident ensued that resulted in a flagrant foul on Cambage, starting center for the Las Vegas Aces, and a technical foul on Brown, backup center for the Los Angeles Sparks. But the third-quarter intervention by WNBA officials did not put an end to the tangle.

A video of Brown speaking about the incident in her postgame presser (<https://twitter.com/BradyKlopferNBA/status/1144469494166781952>) circulated on Twitter. Cambage took issue with Brown's claim that earlier in the game Cambage had threatened to pull her hair out. "I just didn't think she would really do it," Brown said.

On Twitter, Cambage wrote that she had made multiple requests throughout the game, including to the referees, that Brown tie her hair back. Cambage closed the Twitter argument with a shot at Brown's Senegalese twists.

"I get y'all tryna be cute with some inches," Cambage wrote, "but (tie) that cheap shit up."

For some fans, Cambage's barb presented the opportunity to mock Brown for having a "weave" or debate whether the WNBA should impose rules requiring players to better secure their hair. Others, mainly women of color, expressed disappointment on Twitter, calling Cambage's words "disrespectful," "catty," "inappropriate" and "unprofessional" behavior, with one person calling it "social media bullying."

Brown refuses to believe that Cambage, also a black woman, meant her comment from colorism-based prejudice: the entrenched "good hair" versus "bad hair" belief borne in the 1800s from the need to survive in a racist society.

"I think it was just out of frustration," Brown said. "Looking back, she was probably just talking out of anger. As anybody knows, sometimes (anger) gets the best of you. ... She let her emotions get the better of her and she took to Twitter and she got that backlash for it as she should have."

That the comment came from Cambage, a mixed-race, light-skinned woman, and targeted a dark-skinned woman sporting extensions is at the root of the conflict, Brown believes. Some people took it that way, she said, even if the 6-foot-8 Australian intended to insult Brown specifically, and not an entire group of black women.

Still, the incident, and its impassioned responses, raised questions of whether the league should get involved or implement rules about how players secure their hair on the court. Based on conversations *The Athletic* had with various parties, it's complicated.

The WNBA has at no time had rules in place about how players should wear their hair in terms of style. For those who choose to wear headbands, however, the league requires that they be black, white or of the team's primary color.

Should rules on hair be proposed in the future, however, players who value the individuality and creativity of hair may not be on board.

“Hairstyle for some women or men in sport is about freedom of expression and sometimes is very much a part of their brand,” said WNBPA executive director Terri Jackson in a statement.

Because some have complained that long hair prevents referees and broadcasters from seeing jersey numbers, Jackson added: “The inability to see jersey numbers could be aided by returning the jersey number to the front and implementing rules about (the) size of corporate logos similar to what we see in other leagues, including the NBA.”

Two scholars who have dedicated years to researching racial relations in American society, including as they pertain to hair, viewed Cambage’s comments toward Brown in different ways.

Dr. Noliwe Rooks, a professor of Africana studies at Cornell University, chalks Cambage’s comments up to a “diss” by a competitive athlete.

Lori L. Tharps, an associate professor of journalism at Temple University and co-author of the book “Hair Story: Untangling the roots of Black hair in America,” considers it “hair shaming” that crosses a “line of respect.”

Brown assumed that the Aces center had acted out of frustration, that she did not intend to cross the “line of respect.” Cambage confirmed as much in a statement to *The Athletic* this week.

“As a black woman who has been fortunate enough to travel the world, I am very familiar with the beautiful and varied hairstyles that women of color wear to represent themselves,” Cambage said. “My comments were born(e) out of the frustration of constantly getting tangled in Kalani’s hair, which directly impacted my ability to perform my job to the standards which I hold myself to, and were in no way meant to demean her choice in hairstyle.”

The WNBA did not provide an official statement on the matter.

To Tharps, the comment hit a soft spot for black women.

“I just think it was attacking one of our most vulnerable places as black women, our hair,” Tharps said.

After all, as Tharps and Rooks will tell you, throughout American history blacks internalized the racism of whites. They built social hierarchies on hair texture and skin complexion that elevated women who looked like Cambage and excommunicated those who looked like Brown.



Liz Cambage (Jeff Bottari / NBAE via Getty Images)

To preserve their own upward social mobility, lighter-skinned blacks as far back as the 1800s, known as “the black elite,” according to Tharps, adopted the discriminatory practices of whites and distanced themselves from their darker-skinned, kinkier-haired counterparts. To

join churches of the black elite, for example, aspiring congregants had to pass brown-bag and comb tests: If their skin was darker than a brown bag or if their hair was not silky enough for a fine-toothed comb to pass smoothly through it, membership was denied.

According to Tharps in “Hair Story,” black colleges and universities established in the late 1800s were “founded to educate the black elite, but there too, judging from photographs of the early graduates, it seems as if one of the unspoken requirements for admission was a skin tone or hair texture that showcased a Caucasian ancestor.”

When it comes to hair in particular, blacks still face discrimination in all aspects of life. A referee required high school wrestler Andrew Johnson to cut his dreadlocks (https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/wrestler-being-forced-to-cut-dreadlocks-was-manifestation-of-decades-of-racial-desensitization/2018/12/27/66f520ba-0a10-11e9-85b6-41c0fe0c5b8f_story.html?utm_term=.3f75aa990da5) before a match in 2018 in order to be allowed to compete; white wrestlers with similar-length hair did not face the same mandate. A Mississippi television station fired news anchor Brittney Noble Jones last year because her boss deemed her natural hair to be “unprofessional.” (<https://www.today.com/style/brittany-noble-was-told-her-natural-hair-was-unprofessional-fired-t146857>)

Rooks commented on the power of black hair to spur change. “We need more of a focus on how our bodies are political at the same time that they bring us pleasure,” she said. That New York City passed a human rights law (<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cchr/downloads/pdf/Hair-Guidance.pdf>) that criminalizes discrimination on the basis of hair to protect the rights of people like Johnson and Noble Jones is proof of that power.

Tharps notes the progress that has transpired now that black Americans are embracing their natural locks, and identifies where change is still needed.

“Black hair is completely out of the closet,” Tharps said. “People know not to touch it. They know it means more (to black people) than white hair (means to white people). And now, particularly with new laws being passed in NYC and California, they know black people have been discriminated against because of their hair.

“What needs to happen now is simply getting people of all races, black people included, to recognize the significance and history of black hair in America and be prepared for any and all consequences — legal and social — when they cross the line of respect.”

The New York Commission on Human Rights explains the purpose of its new law banning discrimination on the basis of hair by specifying that black people have a right to their natural hair, free of discrimination, ridicule or consequence. The commission identified some of the hairstyles for which blacks have been discriminated against in the workplace, in sports and in centers of learning — styles commonly worn by players in the WNBA: “treated or untreated hairstyles such as locs, cornrows, twists, braids, Bantu knots, fades, Afros ... uncut or untrimmed ...”

And the commission challenged long-held stereotypes about black hair: “There is a widespread and fundamentally racist belief that black hairstyles are not suited for formal settings, and may be unhygienic, messy, disruptive, or unkempt.” The law is an important step toward repairing hardships many blacks have faced for wearing their hair as it grows naturally out of their heads.

Like Cambage, Brown also has an appreciation for the diverse beauty of black hair. “I think that it’s all beautiful hair,” she said. The 6-foot-7 Sparks center explained her own hair transitions, which exemplify an appreciation for varied styles and lengths.

“I am going natural,” Brown said. “I’ve been natural for almost a year. So when I can cut all of the relaxer off then I will kind of debut it.”

Until that haircut comes, Brown chooses to wear extensions, which also serve the purpose of protecting her hair — a strategy many black women use to keep their delicate, easily breakable strands healthy.

“I’ve always loved my hair,” Brown said. “I protect my hair. Because I am an athlete, I sweat a lot, so I have to put it away. And, I’m lazy — let’s be real — so I’m not going to be (managing my hair) every single day. So I’m going wear (hair) closures or a wig or something like that.”

“I see a lot of women do a lot with their 4C texture and it still looks pretty,” Brown added.

But the ultimate goal of any WNBA player is to “flow,” she says. “Flow” is a state of mind. It is confidence and swagger emblematic of a woman being good at what she does and knowing it. It is history and choice and freedom. It is, as the WNBA slogan goes for the 2018-19 season, “unapologetically us.”

“I’ve always had long dramatic hair,” Brown said. “You can go back to my Baylor days. I’ve always had that long ponytail. If you’re going to be dramatic, it can be curly, straight, and I don’t think it matters what length it is.”

The WNBA is finally embracing and promoting players as their authentic selves and the black women of the league are showcasing, in dramatic ways, the diversity of black hair: from Brittney Griner’s iconic dreadlocks to Brittney Syke’s afro, Imani McGee-Stafford’s natural puffs to Skylar Diggins-Smith’s silky waves, Layshia Clarendon’s curly mohawk to Asia Durr’s pressed ponytail, Nneke Ogwumike’s braids to Chiney Ogwumike’s silky extensions, Liz Cambage’s silky, wavy bun to Kalani Brown’s twists.

The league is filled with examples of fierce, confident women who are playing world-class basketball and living life on their own terms. Among them are the black women who showcase the infinite possibilities of their hair and, in turn, empower young girls who look like them.

“You can’t love black people if you don’t love black hair,” Rooks said.

Tharps sees the concept differently.

“I think it’s the other way around,” she said. “The more comfortable people are with black people, the more comfortable they will be with black hair. Can’t have the hair without the people.”

(Top photo of Kalani Brown: Chris Elise / NBAE via Getty Images)

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9 COMMENTS

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Chris P. Jul 12, 3:14pm

Outstanding article Tamryn. I am happy you have joined The Athletic, and am looking forward to your WNBA coverage. They really really go out of their way to recruit some of the very best to these pages and my subscription continues to increase in value.

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You STAFF Jul 12, 3:19pm

@Chris P. Thank you for subscribing, reading and considering me among "the very best" helping your subscription to "increase in value." Your comment means a lot.

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Jesse B. Jul 12, 4:28pm

Excellent piece! I'm glad to hear both of them are willing to acknowledge why it's a big deal, but not hold any grudges.

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Miles S. Jul 12, 5:03pm

Strong writing and a compelling story. Well done!

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Jim T. Jul 12, 5:41pm

This was EXCELLENT. Honestly, this should be one of those "open to the public" pieces that The Athletic does every now and then. Very deserving

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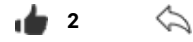
Princess P. Jul 12, 7:45pm

Great Read and suck and in-depth and enlightening look at the entire situation

 1 

Drennie W. Jul 13, 3:29am

Well researched and written article.



MJ A. Jul 13, 3:46pm

Terrific piece, thanks for writing!



Hodaka K. Jul 13, 4:26pm

I agree that Cambage's comments were probably out of frustration, but the backlash she got was just. Ultimately, it opened up both of them to speak of an important topic. Tamryn did an amazing job of capturing both sides and weaving in the significance of the history behind black hair.



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