

“Great Speed But Little Stamina:” The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority

David K. Wiggins
Associate Professor of Physical Education
Kansas State University

“Environmental factors have a great deal to do with excellence in sport” wrote Martin Kane, a senior editor for *Sports Illustrated*, in a 1971 article entitled “An Assessment of Black is Best,” “but so do physical differences and there is an increasing body of scientific opinion which suggests that physical differences in the races might well have enhanced the athletic potential of the Negro in certain sports.” The assertion by Kane that black athletic superiority in sport was perhaps due to innate racial characteristics caused a furor among many people because of its lack of scientific proof and by virtue of the fact that it came out during a period of intense interest in black Americans and appeared in one of this country’s most popular and highly circulated magazines. Kane’s comments resulted in a flurry of responses that ranged from outright rejection of the claim that black athletes were innately superior athletically to a grudging acceptance that blacks were much better than their white counterparts in some sports and decidedly inferior in others.¹

This paper traces the on-going debate waged over black athletic superiority, charting the various arguments and theories espoused by individuals who have sought to explain black dominance in sport. Martin Kane was hardly the first person to raise the question of black athletic superiority. At least since the latter part of the nineteenth century people from all walks of life—coaches, athletes, trainers, cultural anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, physical educators, biologists, medical doctors, and sportscasters—have put forth their own theories regarding racial differences and their possible effects on sport performance. Certain trends were evident in their comments and the issue of black athletic superiority had different ramifications for whites and blacks. Notwithstanding, the weight of the evidence indicates that the differences between participation patterns of black and white athletes is primarily a consequence of different historical experiences that individuals and their particular racial group underwent. While elite championship athletes are blessed with a certain genetic makeup that contributes to their success in sport these inherited attributes transcend any racial groupings.

1. Martin Kane, “An Assessment of Black is Best,” *Sports Illustrated*, January 18, 1971, pp. 72-83.

Early Scientific Principles and the Black Athlete

Edwin B. Henderson, the noted physical educator and early historian of the black athlete, claimed that the question of black athletic superiority was first advanced when John B. Taylor, the great track star from the University of Pennsylvania, was capturing collegiate championships in the quarter mile during the first decade of this century. Henderson wrote that some people of the era attributed Taylor's outstanding track performances to the fact that he was built more like a white runner, possessing larger gastrocnemius and soleus muscles than are found in the "African Negro."²

While Henderson was correct in acknowledging the debate over Taylor's prominence in track and field, there is little question that discussion of the black athletes special talents occurred long before the University of Pennsylvania track star came on the scene. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a number of outstanding black athletes distinguished themselves in predominantly white organized sport which did not escape the attention of contemporary white academicians and social commentators who were already busily involved in studying racial differences. Investigators on both sides of the Atlantic were intent on determining the hierarchy of races and distinguishing one from another by examining such things as skull sizes, human brains, facial angles, skin color, structure of human hair, and the different varieties of body lice. The upshot of the various investigations—even when the results did not withstand the testing methods of science—were that blacks were physically different from whites and possessed an accompanying character and temperament that was unique to their species.³

One of the first black athletes who was talked about in terms of the scientific principles of the day was Peter Jackson, the great Australian boxer, probably best known as the man John L. Sullivan refused to fight. Many people in boxing tried to explain Jackson's dominance over his opponents by depicting him as a natural born fighter who was more skilled at physical combat than the majority of white pugilists. Jackson was reminiscent of the primitive man whose essential attribute was physical power. He was, in the words of one contemporary newspaper, a "human fighting animal," a personification of pre-civilized days when African men had to survive on strength alone.⁴ However, in keeping with the scientific theories of the period, Jackson also possessed certain weaknesses that were indigenous to other black fighters. The common opinion in boxing circles was that Jackson could be beaten if you forced him to go the distance because he lacked stamina. In addition, Jackson could be taken out by a blow to the stomach, an inherent weak spot of all black fighters. The secret to beating

2. Edwin B. Henderson, "Physical Education and Athletics Among Negroes," in *The History of Physical Education and Sport*, ed. Bruce L. Bennett (Chicago: The Athletic Institute, 1972), pp. 82-83.

3. See Thomas P. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); John S. Hailer, *Outcasts from Evolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

4. *San Francisco Examiner*, May 31, 1892.

Jackson was to “pummel his ribs” and he would soon lose his willingness to fight.⁵

The use of racial theories to explain athletic performance spilled over into the twentieth century. In 1901 Marshall “Major” Taylor, the famous bicycle racer from Indianapolis, was examined by a group of medical doctors at the Academy of Sciences in Bordeaux, France in an attempt to test the racial stereotypes of the period. The doctors examined his heart, took anthropometric measurements, x-rayed him and concluded by stating that Taylor “could be said to be absolutely perfect were it not for the fact that because of his bicycle racing, which has exaggerated the size of certain of his leg muscles, his thighs were a little over developed.”⁶

The discussion of Taylor’s special talents was followed by additional comments over the next few years about the abilities of runner John B. Taylor, heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, and occasionally other outstanding black athletes. However, there was a noticeable decline in the amount of attention given to the question of black athletic superiority over the first and second decades of this century. The reason for the decline is easy to understand. By this time the majority of black athletes had been successfully shunted behind segregated walls and eliminated from white organized sport. With the occasional exception of some outstanding performances turned in by black athletes in Olympic competition, on predominantly white university campuses, and in professional boxing, the largest number of black athletes were left to compete among themselves on their own amateur and professional teams.’

Jesse Owens and Other “Black Auxiliaries” Intensify Debate

The discussion of black athletic superiority resurfaced following the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles and then accelerated after Jesse Owens’ record breaking performances at the Big Ten Track Championships in 1935. The exploits of Owens and other black track stars such as Eddie Tolan, Ralph Metcalfe, Ed Gordon, Eulace Peacock, and Ben Johnson resulted in a number of comments from various people who ascribed the success of these athletes in the sprints and jumping events either to a longer heel bone or stronger achilles tendon than those of their white competitors, or implied that in some way it was due to racial characteristics. In 1936 for example, Frederick Lewis Allen, in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, noted that one of the most intriguing “athletic phenomena of our time is the emergence of American negroes as the best sprinters and jumpers in the world.” Allen speculated that the rise to athletic supremacy by black Americans was primarily a sociological phenomena. He added, however, that blacks were perhaps particularly “well fitted emotionally for the sort of brief, terrific effort

5. See David K. Wiggins, “Peter Jackson and the Elusive Heavyweight Championship: A Black Athlete’s Struggle Against the Late Nineteenth Century Color Line” *Journal of Sport History* 12 (Summer 1985): 143-168. Randy Roberts discusses the stereotype of black boxers in his biography of Jack Johnson. See Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), pp. 61-63.

6. Andrew Ritchie, *Marshall “Major” Taylor* (San Francisco: Bicycle Books, 1988), p. 174.

7. See for example, Edwin B. Henderson, *The Negro in Sports* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1939); A.S. “Doc Young, *Negro Firsts in Sports* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1963); Jack Orr, *The Black Athlete: His Story in American History* (New York: Lion Books, 1969).

which sprints and jumps required.” Yale track coach, Albert McGall, suggested that maybe black sprinters got better leverage-and a little advantage over white sprinters-because of the projecting heel bone that was frequently found among blacks. Dean Cromwell, the well-known University of Southern California and Olympic track coach, felt that blacks excelled as sprinters and jumpers because they were closer to the primitive than white men. “It was not long ago,” said Cromwell, “that his [blacks] ability to sprint and jump was a life-and-death matter to him in the jungle. His muscles are pliable, and his easy-going disposition is a valuable aid to the mental and physical relaxation that a runner and a jumper must have.”⁸

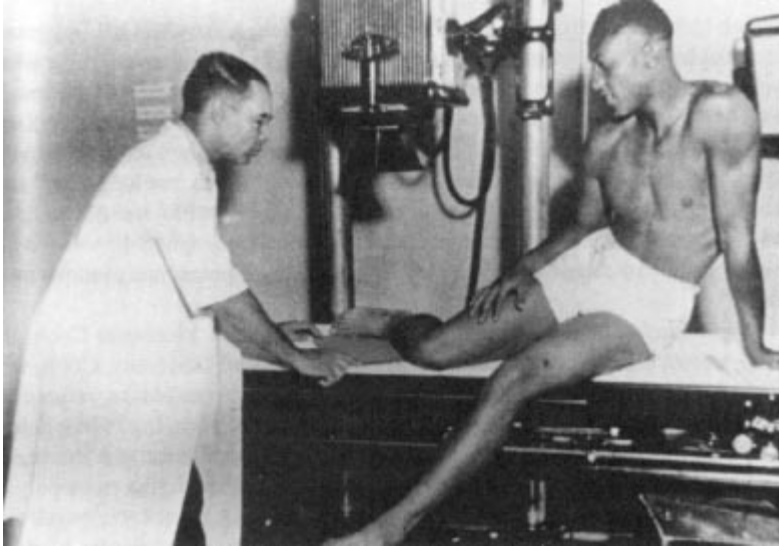
These kinds of speculations caught the interest of W. Montague Cobb, the well-known black physical anthropologist from Howard University. Cobb, who had a long interest in the physical constitutions of American blacks, refuted the claims that athletic success was based on racial characteristics. In a 1936 article in *The Journal of Health and Physical Education* entitled “Race and Runners,” Cobb argued that no particular racial group has ever exercised a monopoly or supremacy in a particular kind of event in track and field. He acknowledged that certain events might continue to be more popular among particular kinds of people, but noted that “split-second difference in the performances of the great black and white sprinters were insignificant from an anthropological standpoint. The physiques of champion black and white sprinters in general and Jesse Owens in particular, revealed no indications that “Negroid physical characters are anatomically concerned with the present dominance of Negro athletes in national competition in the short dashes and the broad jump.”⁹

Cobb also questioned, as have many cultural anthropologists, whether there was even such a thing as a racial group considering the enormous lack of racial homogeneity within both the black and white cultures. He noted that Howard Drew, the former sprinter from the University of Southern California, was “*usually taken for a white man by those not in the know.” Ed Gourdin, the great sprinter and long jumper from Harvard, had dark straight hair, no distinctly black features, and a light brown complexion. Cobb pointed out that Jesse Owens did not even possess what was generally, but erroneously considered, the “Negroid type of calf, foot and heel bone.” The measurement of Owens’ gastrocnemius, in fact, was more in line with that of a “caucasoid type rather than the negroid.” Cobb suggested that proper training and incentive were the key factors in the making of a champion, and implied that black athletes, like their white counterparts, were stimulated by a “desire to emulate their predecessors.”¹⁰ In essence, Cobb was

8. Fredrick Lewis Allen, “Breaking World Records,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 173 (August, 1936): 302-310; Marshall Smith, “Giving the Olympics an Anthropological Once-over,” *Life*, October 23, 1964, pp. 81-84; Dean B. Cromwell and Al Wesson, *Championship Techniques in Track and Field* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1941), 6.

9. W. Montague Cobb, “Race and Runners,” *The Journal of Health and Physical Education* 7 (January, 1936): 3-7, 52-56.

10. *Ibid.* Cobb published an extensive review of literature dealing with studies concerned with the anthropometric measurements of blacks. See W. Montague Cobb “The Physical Constitution of the American Negro,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 3 (1934): 340-388. The contemporary version of Cobb’s article might



W. Montague Cobb, the noted physical anthropologist from Howard University, took anthropometric measurements on Jesse Owens, ultimately concluding that the success of blacks in track and field was not based on racially linked physical characteristics but on such things as proper training and motivation to succeed. (Photo courtesy of *Chicago Defender*)

similar to other prominent intellectuals of the decade in that he espoused the theory that environment not race determined the individual capabilities of man. This was certainly the underlying thesis, or message of E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Ann Petry's *The Street*.

Cobb was not the only scientist during the 1930s to examine the physical differences between the races and determine the possible effects they had on athletic performance. Eleanor Metheny, the noted physical educator from the State University of Iowa, was intrigued by the debate being waged over the prominence of black athletes in track and field. In 1939, Metheny conducted a study in which she attempted to determine if there were some differences between blacks and whites in proportions of the body which gave blacks an advantage in certain types of athletic performances. She first took anthropometric measurements on 51 black and 51 white male students at the State University of Iowa and analyzed the differences between the two groups, as well as compared the findings with those of other investigators. Metheny found statistically significant differences in bodily proportions between the black and white students.¹¹

On the basis of her anthropometric measurements of the black and white students, Metheny presented several kinesiological implications for athletic

be James H. Jordan's, "Physiological and Anthropometrical Comparisons of Negroes and Whites," *Journal of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation* 40 (Nov. Dec. 1969): 93-99.

11. Eleanor Metheny, "Some Differences in Bodily Proportions Between American Negro and White Male College Students as Related to Athletic Performance," *Research Quarterly* 10 (December, 1939): 41-53.

performance. While careful to point out that her findings were only tentative and that such things as reaction time, muscle viscosity, and various psychological factors played an important role in determining success in particular activities, Metheny offered, nonetheless, the possible effects different body types could have on sport participation. She suggested, for example, that blacks could be at an advantage in throwing and jumping events because of their longer forearms and hands. In jumping, the longer, heavier arm is able to develop greater momentum, and this momentum, when transmitted to the body as a whole, would assist blacks in jumping. She also noted that the longer legs and narrower hips of blacks would aid them in running because they permitted longer strides and less angular reaction to the forward stride. On the other hand, the chest construction and markedly lower breathing capacity of blacks would handicap them in distance running and other events of longer duration.¹²

Clinical psychiatrist Laynard Holloman presented several theories about black athletic superiority in a 1943 essay entitled "On the Supremacy of the Negro Athlete in White Athletic Competition." He implied that hatred and a desire for revenge against whites was one reason for the supremacy of black athletes in certain American sports. Black fighters dominated boxing, for instance, because it was an ideal way for them to express their hatred for the white man through getting revenge. Unable to discharge their hatred toward the white man directly, black boxers fought against white opponents with a kind of savageness they did not exhibit when fighting members of their own race. In the squared ring, black boxers expressed their pent-up emotions, discharged latent energies, satisfied their restless ego, and healed their wounded narcissism. Holloman also hypothesized that blacks strove for excellence in sport because it was a means to compensate for their feelings of inferiority. Black athletes, said Holloman, sought "victory with a drive that is much more forceful and insistent than that for a medal or the plaudits of the crowd." What they fought for on the playing fields was a "quieting of the strife that goes on in the mind that thinks itself inferior, to quiet the yelling of a group that claims itself superior."¹³

Black Dominance in the Manly Art

Much of the discussion about black athletic superiority during the 1950s centered on boxing. Especially during the early part of the decade there was a good deal of speculation why blacks ruled boxing and whether their overrepresentation in the sport would lead to its demise. The black owned journal, *Our World*, asserted in 1951 that blacks ruled boxing because it was a way to make big money, fast. The large majority of black boxers were "underprivileged kids" who discovered they could capture their "pot of gold" by using their fists. Former heavyweight champion, Jack Dempsey, offered his own explanations as to why blacks dominated the fight game. An unlikely candidate to discuss black dominance since he had supposedly ducked the great black boxer, Harry Wills,

12. Ibid.

13. Laynard L. Holloman, "On the Supremacy of the Negro Athlete in White Athletic Competition," *The Psychoanalytic Review* 30 (April, 1943): 157-162.



The distinguished physical educator, Eleanor Metheny, was one of the many people during the 1930s who became fascinated with the athletic performances of black athletes. (Photo courtesy of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance)

Dempsey argued that other things besides money accounted for the preponderance of black boxing champions. He noted, in tones not typically reserved for blacks, that one reason black boxers dominated the sport was their penchant for hard work. Black fighters were willing to pay the price necessary to become champions. As a group, they trained more diligently and more conscientiously than whites. Mike Jacobs, the famous boxing promoter, echoed Dempsey's comments, arguing that black boxers worked harder than their white counterparts. Generally coming from underprivileged backgrounds, black boxers learned early in life that they had to fight hard to survive and to succeed.¹⁴

The comments of Dempsey and Jacobs seem important for two reasons. First of all, both men used terms to describe black boxers that were antithetical to white America's stereotype of blacks. While whites variously characterized blacks as docile, lazy, irresponsible, and childlike, Dempsey and Jacobs utilized such terms as "hard working" and "progressive" to depict black fighters of the period. This seems significant because the implication in any discussion of black athletic superiority was that blacks achieved success in sport by virtue of their naturally endowed physical skills and not through hard work, sacrifice, self-discipline, and other admirable character traits. Perhaps nowhere was this stereotypical image of the black athlete more fully expressed than by the Harlem Globetrotters, the famous all-black basketball team founded by Abe Saperstein in 1927. The Globetrotters perpetuated the black Sambo stereotype with all its negative connotations, coming across as frivolous, somewhat dishonest children who were lazy and given to wild bursts of laughter. Running about the court emitting shrill jungle sounds and shouting in thick southern accents, the Globetrotters style of play reflected all the prejudices that the dominant culture had built up about blacks in this country. The Globetrotters had innate physical skills, exhibited "natural rhythm," but were in need of "mature white handling." Sportswriter Jack Olsen noted that "the white man's encapsulated view of the whole negro race [was] set to the rhythm of Sweet Georgia Brown."¹⁵

Mike Jacobs' comments were noteworthy in that they were followed closely by a lengthy debate about boxing's future and whether the over-representation of blacks in the sport would cause its ultimate demise. Certainly some of the underlying fears associated with the discussion of black athletic superiority was that the preponderance of blacks in sport diminishes fan interest, cuts gate receipts, and seriously jeopardizes the future of individual sport franchises. Club owners are certainly aware of the potential problems when white spectators are asked to identify with a racial minority they have historically rejected.¹⁶

14. "Why Negroes Rule Boxing," *Our World* 6 (November, 1951): 48-152; Jack Dempsey, "Why Negroes Rule Boxing," *Ebony* 7 (May, 1950): 29-32; Mike Jacobs, "Have Negroes Killed Boxing?" *Ebony* 7 (May, 1950): 29 - 32.

15. See Ben Lombardo "The Harlem Globtrotters and the Perpetuation of the Black Stereotype," *The Physical Educator* 35 (May 1978): 60-63.

16. See Frank T. Bannister, Jr. "Search for 'White Hopes' Threatens Black Athletes," *Ebony* 35 (February, 1980): 130-134; Frank De Ford, "The Big Game is Over: This Way to the Exit, Bwana." *Ovi* (Spring 1973): 51, 132, 134; Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1973), pp. 214.



Heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Dempsey, here in his well-known title bout against Tommy Gibbons in Shelby, Montana on July 4, 1923, attributed the outstanding performances of black boxers to their penchant for hard work and diligence in training. (Photo courtesy of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles)

Olympic Competition and Resurgence of the Debate

The discussion of racial differences and sport performance waned somewhat during the latter 1950s but resurfaced again the following decade. In fact, during the 1960s the debate seemed to rise and fall in every Olympic year. The outstanding performances of black athletes in Olympic competition and their increased involvement in professional sport refueled the debate over black athletic superiority. The British physician, James M. Tanner, garnered some attention at the beginning of the period with his book *The Physique of the Olympic Athlete*. He admitted that “economic and social circumstances” probably accounted for the large number of blacks in competitive sport, but noted that the different body types of black track and field performers were perhaps responsible for their tremendous success in certain events. Based on anthropometric measurements of 137 athletes at the Rome Olympics in 1960 and earlier at the British Empire and Commonwealth Games, Tanner and his associates concluded that there were large and significant racial differences among track and field performers that might well have enhanced the athletic

potential of blacks in particular events like the sprints, high jump, and long jump, while inhibiting their performance in events such as the marathon.”

Like Eleanor Metheny some twenty years earlier, each time the performance of black athletes contradicted Tanner’s theory of physical differences, he offered either an alternative explanation or said that more research needed to be done on the topic. He noted, for example, that the body type of blacks should make them particularly well-suited for the pole vault. But blacks did not distinguish themselves in the event, said Tanner, “perhaps only for reasons of tradition.”¹⁸ Tanner, like Metheny and a host of other academicians, never illustrated exactly how physiological differences translate into outstanding athletic performances. He presented no evidence that success in sprinting is influenced by slimmer calves per se or that the ability to achieve great heights in the pole vault is directly related to arm length.

In 1964, the writer Marshall Smith published an article in *Life* magazine entitled “Giving the Olympics an Anthropological Once-Over,” where he summarized the various opinions given on the questions of racial differences and athletic performance. Smith relied to a great extent on the expertise of Carleton S. Coon, a former Harvard and University of Pennsylvania anthropologist, and Edward E. Hunt, Jr., an anthropologist from Harvard, who both believed that inherited physical adaptations seemed to play a part in the abilities of certain members of particular races to excel in different sports. They admitted that social factors and/or motivation played a part in the success of black athletes, but contended that the particular body type of blacks made them more suitable for certain sports. Coon, for example, described the feet of black men, with their longer heel bone and thicker fat pads, as a “marvelous organ for mobility, leaping, jumping and landing with a minimum of shock.” In addition, the black man’s slender calves with tendons proportionately longer than those of whites and with an overall appearance of loose jointedness, was characteristic, said Coon, of “living things (cheetahs, for instance) known for their speed and leaping ability.”¹⁹

One of the more thorough examinations of the topic was undertaken by sportswriter Charles Maher in a five-part series on the black athlete written in 1968 for the *Los Angeles Times*.²⁰ In two separate articles entitled “Blacks Physically Superior? Some Say They’re Hungrier,” and “Do Blacks Have a Physical Advantage? Scientists Differ,” Maher presented the various arguments given concerning racial differences and athletic performance. Be-

17. James M. Tanner, *The Physique of the Olympic Athlete: A Study of 137 Track and Field Athletes at the XVII Olympic Games*, Rome, 1960. (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1964). For another British perspective on black athletic superiority see Adolphe Abrahams, “Race and Athletics,” *The Eugenics Review* 44 (July, 1952): 143-145.

18. Abraham, “Race and Athletics,” p. 107. Olympic athletes have been the source of much attention down through the years by spat scientists interested in anthropometric measurements. See for example, Alfonso L. de Garay, et al., *Genetic and Anthropological Studies of Olympic Athletes* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974); T. K. Cureton, *Physical Fitness of Champion Athletes* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1951); Ernst Jokl, “Essay on Medical Sociology of Sports,” in Ernst Jokl, *Medical Sociology and Cultural Anthropology of Sport and Physical Education* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles L. Thomas, 1964), pp. 65-71.

19. Smith, “Giving the Olympics an Anthropological Once-over.” pp. 81-84 (quotes, p. 83).

20. See *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 29, 1968.

sides citing the work of Montague Cobb, Carlton S. Coon, and other previously mentioned experts, he also contributed additional insights by quoting opinions of well-known sport scientists, coaches, and athletes. By and large, the people Maher quoted attributed the success of black athletes to factors other than physical superiority. Thomas K. Cureton, a well-known professor of physical education at the University of Illinois who spent a lifetime studying the physical characteristics of champion athletes, said that performance differentials were not the result of race. "Because of years of training, yes," noted Cureton. "Because of motivation, yes. Because of social goals, yes. Those make a difference. But not race." John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach at U.C.L.A., said he doubted that the athletic success of blacks had anything to do with physical superiority. "I think he [the black athlete] has just a little more ambition to excel in sports," noted Wooden, "because there aren't enough other avenues open to him." Tommy Hawkins, the well-known black basketball player for the Los Angeles Lakers, probably came close to the truth when he noted that the black athlete's preoccupation with sports in this country was a self-perpetuating condition. "From an early age" said Hawkins, "you identify with people who have been successful. From a Negro standpoint, those people would be in sports and entertainment."²¹

Serious Dialogue Between Kane and Edwards

Three years after Maher's series of articles appeared, Martin Kane published his previously mentioned essay in *Sports Illustrated*, detailing the numerous arguments given about possible black athletic superiority. Kane attempted to present evidence supporting the notion that outstanding athletic performances in particular sports were based on racial characteristics indigenous to the black population. Utilizing the expertise of coaches, black athletes, athletic researchers, and medical doctors, Kane suggested that racially linked physical, psychological, and historical factors have given rise to black dominance in sport.²² There were a number of interesting speculations made by various people in Kane's article, but perhaps the strongest comments on the subject came from James Councilman, the Indiana University and former United States Olympic swimming coach. Councilman argued that black athletes were markedly superior to white athletes in those sports that required speed and power because they had more white muscle fibers. Commenting that exercise physiologists were afraid to admit this fact publically, Councilman pointed out that the white muscle fibers so prominent in black athletes were adapted for speed and power, while red muscle fibers, which white athletes had in abundance,

21. *Ibid.*, March 25, 1968.

22. Kane, "An Assessment of Black is Best," pp. 72-83. Anyone interested in the question of black athletic superiority would be well served by looking at some of the work of Robert Malina, the well-known physical anthropologist from the University of Texas. See for example, Robert Malina. "Anthropometric Correlates of Strength and Motor Performance," *Exercise and Sport Science Reviews* 3 (1975): 249-274; *idem*, *Growth and Development the First Twenty Years in Man* (Minneapolis: Burgess, 1975); *idem*. "Secular changes in growth maturation and physical performance," *Exercise and Sport Sciences Reviews* 6 (1979): 203-255.

were adapted for endurance. At the same time, Counsilman asserted that the lack of great black swimmers resulted primarily from socioeconomic reasons. Blacks did not have the opportunity to be good swimmers because they generally lacked the money and did not have access to the facilities that were necessary to achieve excellence in the sport.²³

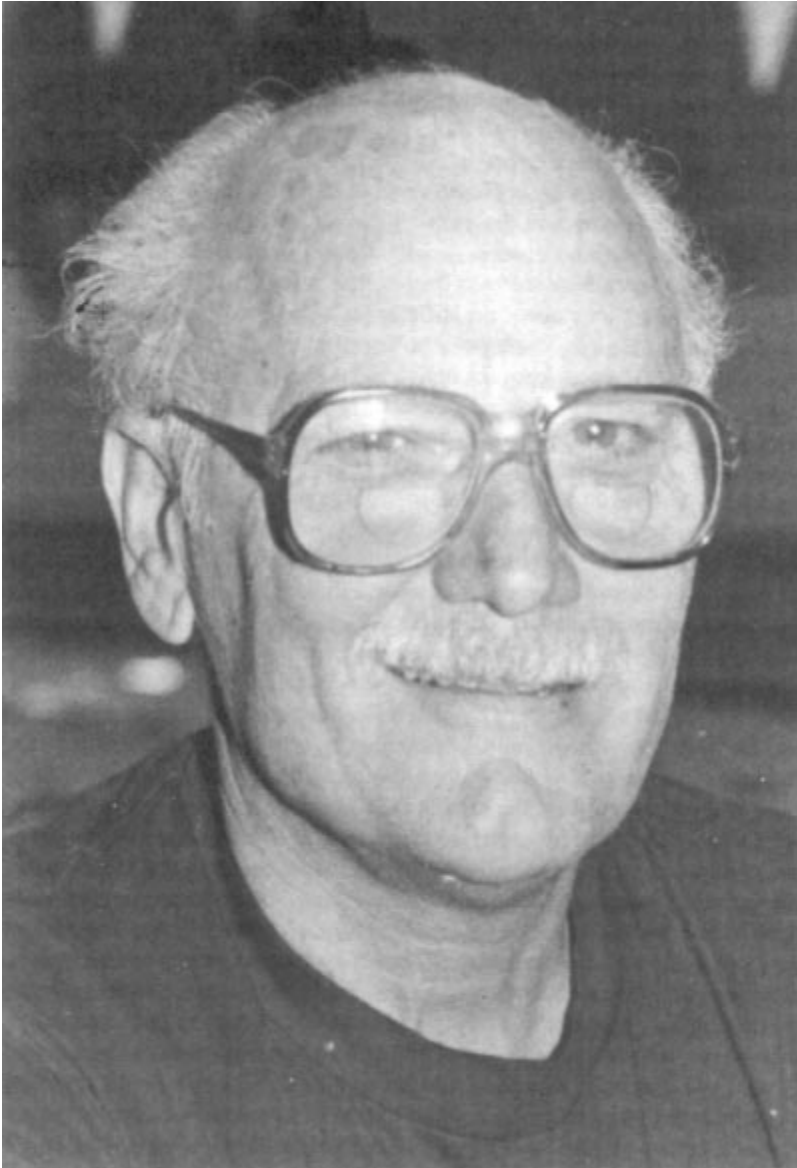
Kane's article drew an angry response from Harry Edwards who refuted all of the sportswriter's proposed theories.²⁴ Edwards noted that Kane's attempt to establish a connection between racially linked physical characteristics and black athletic superiority suffered from serious methodological problems and debatable assumptions about the differences between the races of men. Edwards pointed out, like Montague Cobb and other scholars earlier, that there exists "more differences between individual members of any one racial group than between any two groups as a whole." This fact precluded any assertion by Kane that particular racial groups were predisposed to certain physical activities. Edwards also disputed Kane's assertion that blacks had a peculiar psychological disposition that contributed to their overwhelming success in sport. Specifically, the notion that black athletes are better able to relax under pressure than white athletes not only lacked scientific foundation but was "ludicrous as even a common sense assumption." Lastly, Edwards refuted Kane's suggestion that slavery had weeded out the "hereditarily and congenitally weak" among the black population and created a physically superior group of people. He implied that the major implication of Kane's assertion was that "it opens the door for at least an informal acceptance of the idea that whites are intellectually superior to blacks." The white population lost nothing by supporting the idea of black physical superiority. If anything, they reinforced the old stereotype that blacks were "little removed from the apes in their evolutionary development."²⁵

Edwards concluded by asserting that a variety of societal conditions were responsible for the high value black youths placed on sport and the resultant channeling of a disproportionate number of talented blacks into sport participation. While whites had more visible prestige role models and greater job alternatives, black Americans were restricted to a very narrow range of occupational choices. Sport, and to a lesser extent entertainment, appeared to be the most achievable goals for blacks and as long as that remained the same, black athletic superiority would go unchallenged. This circumstance was most unfortunate, said Edwards, because it encouraged blacks to strive for success in a highly competitive profession that left only so much room for athletes of any color. The vast majority of black aspirants ended up back in the ghetto, either because they lacked the talent to become a superstar, or because they were

23. Kane, "An Assessment of Black is Best," pp. 72-73. It is a common perception in this country's dominant culture that blacks make terrible swimmers because of their "unique" anthropological makeup. For a discussion of blacks in swimming see, John A. Faulkner, "Physiology of Swimming," *Swimming Technique* 6 (April, 1970): 14-20; Malachi Cunningham, Jr., "Blacks in Competitive Swimming," *Swimming Technique* 9 (1973): 107-108.

24. See particularly Edwards' articles, "The Sources of the Black Athlete's Superiority," *The BlackScholar* 3 (November, 1971): 32-41; "The Myth of the Racially Superior Athlete," *Intellectual Digest* 2 (March, 1972): 58-60; "20th Century Gladiators For White America," *Psychology Today* 7 (November, 1973): 43-52.

25. Edwards, "The Sources of the Black Athletes Superiority," pp. 35, 37, 38-39.



Former Olympic swimming Coach James Councilman discussed the different muscle fibers of black and white athletes. He argued that the muscle fibers of black athletes were adapted for speed and power. (Photo courtesy of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance)

unwilling to accommodate themselves to the oppressive tendencies of the American sport establishment. The dream of athletic success became a reality for only a small number of black youths. The large majority were left with unfulfilled fantasies of stardom, glamour, and wealth.²⁶

Coinciding with the debate over black athletic superiority during this period was an equally controversial discussion taking place in academic circles regarding differences between black and white intellectual ability. Just two years prior to the appearance of Kane's article, Arthur R. Jensen, a psychologist from the University of California at Berkeley, rekindled the age-old debate over black and white intelligence differences with the publication of a 123-page study in the *Harvard Educational Review* entitled "How much can we boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" Jensen, who apparently was influenced by William B. Shockley, a well-known professor at Stanford and Nobel Laureate in Physics, caused an uproar by arguing that "it is not an unreasonable hypothesis that genetic factors are strongly implicated in the average, negro-white intelligence difference." Jensen pointed out that heritability measures indicated that about 80 percent of the determinance of intelligence was due to genes and some 20 percent to environment. Jensen noted that after having several discussions with well-known geneticists he could safely conclude that "any groups which have been geographically or socially isolated from one another for many generations are practically certain to differ in their gene pools, and consequently are likely to show differences in any phenotypic characteristics having a high heritability." In addition, said Jensen, "genetic differences are manifested in virtually every anatomical, physiological, and biochemical comparison one can make between representative samples of identifiable racial groups. There is no reason why the brain should be exempt from this generalization."²⁷

Jensen's ideas caused such an uproar that the *Harvard Educational Review* reprinted his entire article in its very next issue, along with critiques by theorists of education, psychologists, and a population geneticist.²⁸ This issue was in turn followed by a number of articles on the subject in various academic journals, a book in 1975 edited by Ashley Montagu devoted specifically to Jensen's ideas, and a myriad of essays since that time on the topic that is sometimes referred to as "Creeping Jensenism."²⁹ The rebuttals took many forms, but the most general criticism came from scholars who viewed Jensen's work with skepticism because of illogical claims in his presentation and his rather naive conception of the interplay between genetic and environmental factors in behavior. Steven Jay Gould argued, for example, that Jensen had no new data on the subject of intelligence testing and "what he did present was

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.

27. Arthur R. Jensen. "How Much Can We Boost I.Q. and Scholastic Achievement?" *Harvard Educational Review* 39 (Winter, 1969): 1-123.

28. See the *Harvard Educational Review* 39 (Spring, 1969).

29. See for example Ashley Montagu, ed., *Race and IQ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); C. L. Brace and F. B. Livingstone, "On Creeping Jensenism" *Race and Intelligence*, ed. C. L. Brace, G R. Gamble, and J. T. Bonds (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1971).

flawed beyond repair by inconsistencies in the data itself' and by inconsistent claims in his presentation."³⁰

The Jensen affair was similar in many ways to the debate over black athletic superiority. Both debates were centered around some controversial research studies, were concerned with trying to distinguish environmental from genetic factors and the possible effects they had on performance, and were marked by volatile responses from many members of both the white and black communities who feared that the discussion led to a perpetuation of long-standing stereotypes rather than an enlightened perspective on racial issues. In essence, the debates were nearly one and the same. Jensen and his cohorts could not fail to discuss physiological differences between the races when speaking of intelligence abilities, while individuals involved in the debate over black athletic superiority could not avoid the implication that blacks were somehow inferior to whites intellectually.

Impact of the Debate in America's Black Community

The increasing number of blacks participating in sport combined with the burgeoning interest in blacks in general throughout the decade of the 1970s caused much speculation about the special skills of black athletes. Much of the discussion was taken up by people from within this country's black community. Black Americans were obviously interested in a debate that concerned them most. In 1972, black Harvard psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint argued that black men, stripped of their social power, focused their energies on other symbols of masculinity, particularly physical power. Writing in an *Ebony* article attractively titled "Sex and the Black Male," Poussaint noted that the need of many black men to display physical power has produced impressive athletic achievements. He pointed out that whites like to be entertained by athletically gifted black men, "as long as it doesn't take the form of having sexual intercourse with white women. Whites want black men to be virile on the work gang and on the playing field, but impotent everywhere else." Unfortunately for whites, argued Poussaint, the success of blacks in athletic competition has enhanced their sexual image. Black men want to "outclass whites on the ballfield, on the dance floor, and in the boxing ring. Black men have an image to maintain and a great psychological victory to win." One of the regrettable consequences of the need to be physically superior, noted Poussaint, "has been the contempt in which many young blacks hold their peers who have opted for success in more sedate activities."³¹

In 1974, Jesse Owens, a man whose performances contributed to the debate over black athletic superiority, told members of the American Medical Association that physical differences had no bearing on the overrepresentation of blacks in American sport. Citing the anthropometric measurements that Montague Cobb had taken of him some 40 years earlier, Owens argued that desire rather

30. See Stephen Jay Gould, "Racist Arguments and I.Q." in Montagu, *Race and IQ*, pp. 145-150.

31. Alvin F. Poussaint, "Sex and the Black Male," *Ebony*, 27 (August, 1972): 114-120 (quotes, pp. 115-16).



Much of the discussion about black athletic superiority has centered around the outstanding performances of sprinters such as Tommie Smith, here capturing the 200 meter final in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. (Photo courtesy of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles)

than physiological differences accounted for the large number of blacks in competitive sport.³²

In the same year that Owens addressed the American Medical Association, sportswriter Bill Rhoden wrote an extended article in *Ebony* titled “Are Black Athletes Naturally Superior?” Rhoden added nothing new to the debate, but reiterated the various theories espoused by Cobb, Edwards, Metbeny, Pous-saint and others. In 1977 *Time* magazine ran an article titled “Black Dominance” in which the opinions of well-known black athletes, among others, were given concerning the question of black athletic superiority. Almost to a man, the black athletes quoted argued that physical differences accounted for the superior performances of blacks in sport. O. J. Simpson, the great running back of the Buffalo Bills, said that blacks were physically geared to speed, an important attribute considering that the majority of sports were geared to speed. “We are built a little differently” noted Simpson, “built for speed-skinny calves, long legs, high asses are all characteristics of blacks.” Echoing similar feelings was Joe Morgan, the outstanding second baseman of the Cincinnati Reds. “I think blacks, for physiological reasons, have better speed, quickness, and ability,” said Morgan. “Baseball, football, and basketball put a premium on those skills.”³³

32. *New York Times*. December 2, 1974.

33. Bill Rhoden, “Are Black Athletes Naturally Superior?” *Ebony* 30 (December 2, 1974): 136-138; “Black Dominance,” *Time* 109 (May 9, 1977): 57-60.

In 1980 Legrand Clegg published an essay in *Sepia* magazine titled "Why Black Athletes Run Faster," in which he reported the research studies being conducted on the question of black athletic superiority by several black scientists on the West Coast. Clegg explained that Malachi Andrews, an associate professor in physical education at California State University, Hayward, along with several black scholars in the School of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State, were convinced that the abundance of melanin in blacks was responsible for their outstanding athletic performances. The researchers believed that melanin rather than being a fairly inert pigment important only for its ability to protect the skin from harmful effects of the sun, was capable of absorbing a great deal of energy, which blacks utilized to achieve superior speed in running events.³⁴

The above comments seemed to be accounted for by ethnic pride and the symbolic importance of athletic success more than anything else. Decidedly image conscious, members of America's black community had often expressed the belief that the success of individual black athletes could possibly quicken the advancement of the whole race. Blacks saw accomplishment as ammunition in the barrage against unreasonable barriers. A great deal of attention was always directed at those blacks who achieved prominence in American life—particularly in those fields in which they excelled in competition with whites—because it presumably helped break down the prevailing opinions of the black man's inferiority and had an uplifting effect on blacks themselves. Every act of a black man that came to public attention—such as a rushing title by Simpson or most valuable player award for Morgan—had expressive connotations far beyond the importance of the act itself.³⁵

The irony was that the same people who were proudly pointing out the success of black athletes in American sport were also emphasizing that blacks should strive for success in other fields of endeavor. One of the important facts about the escalating debate over black athletic superiority during the 1970s was that the more blacks were recognized for their especial athletic abilities, the more America's black intelligentsia stressed how essential it was that younger blacks develop their "brains" as well as their "brawn." Like Harry Edwards, the more learned members of this country's black community were forever trying to reverse the stereotype that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites and feared that the channeling of an impropportionate number of blacks into sport and other forms of entertainment could possibly delimit the conditions of black identity within American culture and guarantee the continuation of those limits. Well-informed members of the black community also realized that the

34. Legrand H. Clegg II, "Why Black Athletes Run Faster," *Sepia* 29 (July, 1980): 18-22. See also "Is Black Fastest?" *Black Sports* 4 (May, 1975): 18-24.

35. David K. Wiggins, "The Quest for Identity: The Dialectic of Black Consciousness and the Involvement of Black Athletes in American Sport," Paper given at the annual meeting of the North American Society for Sport History, Columbus, Ohio, 27 May, 1987. Almost everyone has offered an opinion on the subject of black athletic superiority, including well-known writers who have written popular works on various aspects of sport. See for example David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980, pp. 29-31; James A. Michener, *Sports in America* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 163-167.

chances of a black athlete (or white athlete for that matter) ever playing professional sport was very small. And rather than slavishly aspiring to a career in professional sport, blacks would be better served by honing those skills necessary to achieve success in other professional fields.

America's black intelligentsia recognized, moreover, that success in sport would never completely eradicate the problems of the race. However psychologically satisfying or however materially advantageous to a few, success in athletics was not a satisfactory solution to the problem of discrimination because the political and economic dominance still remained in white hands. In large measure, then, America's learned blacks were rather ambivalent toward sport. While they believed sport was a worthy activity, viewed athletic success as a legitimate goal, and proudly pointed to the achievements of individual black athletes, America's black intelligentsia continually cautioned against an overemphasis on sport and stressed the importance of preparing for life after basketball.³⁶

Examples of this ambivalent attitude toward sport are numerous. Earl Graves, publisher of *Black Enterprise* magazine, said he understood why black children would be attracted to sport. The lure of fame and chance to make large sums of money had a seductive effect on black children in the ghetto. Graves pointed out, however, that at best only one out of every 4,000 black children ever participates in professional sport. Considering these sobering statistics, black children are foolish to throw their "heart and soul into the pursuit of an athletic career."³⁷ Perhaps no one expressed more eloquently the black community's ambivalent attitude towards sport than Arthur Ashe, the black tennis star from Richmond, Virginia. In a frequently cited open letter to black parents in the *New York Times* titled "Send your Children to the Libraries," Ashe argued that "black culture expends too much time, energy and effort raising, praising, and teasing our black children as to the dubious glories of professional sport." He pointed out that blacks have been on the sports and entertainment road for too long. "We need to pull over," says Ashe, "fill up at the library and speed away to congress and the supreme court, the unions and the business world."³⁸ More recently, Alan Page, former defensive lineman of the Minnesota Vikings and Chicago Bears, used the occasion of his induction into Pro Football's Hall of Fame to express his feelings about the overemphasis on sport and the importance of education in America's black community.³⁹

Sport Sociologists Examine the Overrepresentation of Black Athletes

The question of black athletic superiority not only caught the interest of Edwards and other black Americans, but also sport sociologists—who were

36. This attitude has been prevalent in the black community for a long period of time. Black newspapers in the latter half of the nineteenth century, for example, expressed the importance of developing both "Brain" and "Brawn." See for example, *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 18, 1890; *The New York Age*, December 20, 1890.

37. "The Right Kind of Excellence," *Black Enterprise* 10 (November, 1979): 9.

38. *New York Times*, February 6, 1977. See also *ibid.*, May 1, 1977.

39. *Ibid.*, July 31, 1988. See also Anthony Leroy Fisher, "The Best Way Out of the Ghetto," *Phi Delta Kappan* 60 (November, 1978): 240.

busily studying various aspects of the black athletes involvement in American sport. Virtually every sport sociology text and anthology that came out during the 1970s and early 1980s included a discussion of the topic. While many of these books merely summarized the oft-repeated arguments of Kane and Edwards, some of them offered additional insights into the controversy. For example, Stanley Eitzen and George Sage suggested in *Sociology of Sport* (1978), that two of the more likely reasons for black dominance in sport were occupational discrimination and the sports opportunity social structure within American society. The authors pointed out that black athletes may be more determined and motivated to succeed in sport because their opportunities for vertical mobility were limited in American society. Blacks may perceive athletics as one of the areas in which they can realize a measure of success in American culture.⁴⁰

The reason that black athletes tended to gravitate towards certain sports and were underrepresented in others, said Eitzen and Sage, perhaps stemmed from what sociologist John Phillips has called the sports opportunity social structure. Simply stated, black athletes tended to be successful in those sports where they had access to coaching, facilities, and competition, while being underrepresented in those activities where such items were unavailable to them. This accounted for the success of black athletes in such sports as basketball because the skills necessary to achieve a level of proficiency in this activity could be learned in school and community recreation programs. This accounted for the dearth, however, of black athletes in golf, tennis, and other sports typically taught in private clubs which have historically denied membership to certain minority groups for economic and social reasons.⁴¹

Jay Coakley furnished some possible insights into the question of black athletic superiority by discussing the notion of racial differences and their effect on sport performance in his widely cited book *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. Coakley argued that racial differences in sport were not the result of genetic factors but caused by a combination of the different characteristics of particular kinds of sport activities, the patterns of discrimination, and the motivation of individual athletes. Coakley pointed out, for example, that the black athletes selection of sports was predicated on how they defined their chances for success. Like anyone else, black youngsters were likely to adopt highly successful athletes as their role models who would play a part in their career goals and future aspirations in sport. Because the vast majority of these role models participated in a selected number of sports, the chances were good that younger black athletes would elect to take part in the same sports.⁴²

Coakley also suggested that the level of involvement of black athletes in sport was contingent on both the needs of those individuals who controlled sport and

40. D. Stanley Eitzen and George Sage. *Sociology of Sport*, 2nd ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1978), p. 300

41. Ibid., p. 301. See John C. Phillips, "Toward an Explanation of Racial Variations in Top-Level Sports Participation," *International Review of Sport Sociology* 3 (1976): 39-55.

42. Jay Coakley, *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Times/Mosby, 1986), pp. 146-50.

“the amount of off-the-field social contact” that was prevalent in a particular sport. He argued that the lure of big profits on the part of owners in professional sport has caused them to become less concerned about the race of particular athletes and more interested in their skills. Black athletes with requisite skills can gain access to particular sports if they are viewed as potentially big winners and profitable gate attractions. Lastly, Coakley pointed out that blacks were most often found in those sports where social distance was increased (boxing, track, baseball, football and basketball) and underrepresented in those sports that were closely associated with “informal, personal, and often sexually mixed relationships” (golf, bowling, tennis and swimming).⁴³

Among the more thought-provoking discussions of black athletic superiority was a 1982 essay by sociologist James LeFlore entitled “Athleticism Among American Blacks.” LeFlore acknowledged that genetic, environmental, and economic factors certainly played a part in the athletic success of black athletes, but believed that a more comprehensive explanation for black dominance in sport was grounded in what he termed “subcultural and informational poolings.” He argued that the disproportionate number of black athletes in certain sports was contingent on both the cultural setting in which black athletes found themselves and the information that was available to both them and their subculture group. Generally speaking, black athletes arranged their world based upon available information, interpreted the feedback data, and eventually made decisions which hopefully resulted in positive social reward.⁴⁴

LeFlore pointed out that members of the black subculture interpreted their social system through a generalized and specific pool of information. Participation in sports that fostered disapproval from the larger social system were typically avoided by black athletes, while those sports in which blacks were expected to take part attracted a disproportionate number of participants. At the same time, argued LeFlore, the black athletes decision to participate in some sports but not others was, to a great extent, determined by the subculture’s perception of those sports. Blacks who choose to participate in fencing or golf, for example, have to confront the perceived status of these sports within their subculture. If perception of those sports are negative, either because they are viewed as unmanly, deemed unworthy, or because the group views the activities

43. Ibid. For other discussions about black athletes from a sociological perspective see Wilbert Marcellus Leonard II. *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*, 3rd ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1988). pp. 214-255; George H. Sage, *Sport and American Society: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1980). pp. 313-347; D. Stanley Eitzen, ed., *Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979). pp. 356-408; Barry D. McPherson, “The Black Athlete: An Overview and Analysis,” in *Social Problems in Athletics*, ed. Daniel M. Landers, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 122-150; Morgan Worthy and Allan Markle, “Racial Differences in Reactive Versus Self-Paced Sports Activities,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 16 (1970): 439-443; James M. Jones and Adrian Ruth Hochner, “Racial Differences in Sports Activities: A Look at the Self-Paced Versus Reactive Hypothesis,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973): 86-95.

44. James LeFlore “Athleticism Among American Blacks” in *Social Approaches to Sport*, ed. Robert M. Pankin (Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982), pp. 104-21. Two other articles that furnish an insightful look at the black experience in sport are Larry E. Jordan, “Black Markets and Future Superstars: An Instrumental Approach to Opportunity in Sport Forms” *Journal of Black Studies* 11 (March 1981): pp. 289-306; Hal A. Lawson, “Physical Education and Sport in the Black Community: The Hidden Perspective.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 48 (Spring, 1979): 187-95.



Arguably the greatest performance in an athletic event in track and field history was Bob Beamon's world-record breaking long jump in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Beamon was merely one in a long line of black athletes who had captured the event in Olympic competition, (Photo courtesy of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles)

as elitist and of a snobbish nature, then the black athlete must deal with this negativism. Continued participation in these sports may have a decided effect on the relationship between black athletes and other members of the sub-culture.⁴⁵

"Of Mandingo and Jimmy 'The Greek' "

LeFlore's 1982 article did not signal the end of the debate over black athletic superiority. The last few years have been marked by a continuing discussion of the black athletes special talents and overrepresentation in particular sports. Perhaps the best example of the current status of the debate over black athletic superiority can be gleaned from the recent incident involving Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder, a twelve year veteran on CBS's "The N.F.L. Today" show, who received national attention on January 15, 1988 when he told a local television interviewer in Washington D.C. that blacks were better athletes than whites because they were "bred to be that way since the days of slavery" and that if more blacks became coaches "there's not going to be anything left for the white people."⁴⁶ Responding to a question by Ed Hotaling about the progress of blacks in sports, Snyder argued that the beginnings of black athletic superiority occurred during the Civil War period when "the slave owner would breed his big black with his big woman so that he could have a big black kid." Black athletes can "jump higher and run faster," said Snyder, because of their "thigh size and big size." The white athlete will never be able to overcome those physical advantages, continued Snyder, because they are lazy and less motivated than their black counterpart.⁴⁷

Snyder's comments caused a great deal of controversy and drew heated responses from various people. The editors of *Sports Illustrated* said that "Snyder's ramblings betrayed an ignorance of both U.S. history and sport." "The sports prognosticator "was also guilty of the sort of sweeping generalizations on which racial stereotypes and prejudices are built." Harry Edwards called Snyder "obviously incompetent and abysmally ignorant." "I'm not sure that his [Snyder] views in this regard necessarily disqualify him for choosing a betting line," said Edwards later, "but I think a more overriding concern is that he is a disgrace to the network." John Jacob, president and chief executive officer of the Urban League, said that "one would expect a man like Jimmy the Greek or anyone who has this kind of exposure on the national media involving athletics not to deal with myths but empirical data. Its dumb for Jimmy the Greek to make such a ludicrous comment." Susan Kerr, spokeswoman for CBS, issued a statement just an hour after Snyder's interview was aired locally in Washington, D.C., stating that CBS sports deeply regretted the remarks made by Snyder and

45. LeFlore, "Athleticism Among American Blacks," pp. 104-21.

46. See, e.g., *New York Times*, January 16, 17, 1988; Jonathan Rowe, "The Greek Chorus: Jimmy the Greek Got It Wrong But So Did His Critics." *The Washington Monthly* 20 (April, 1988): 31-34; "Of Mandingo and Jimmy 'the Greek.'" *Time* (February 1, 1988): 70; Of Fingerprints and other Clues, "Fortune 117 (February 15, 1988): 123-24; "What We Say, What We Think," *U.S. News & World Report* 104 (February 1, 1988): 27-28.

47. *New York Times*, January 16, 17, 1988.

emphasized that they did not reflect the views of the network.⁴⁸ One day after Kerr issued her statement, CBS made it perfectly clear how they felt about Snyder's comments by firing the well-known sports prognosticator.⁴⁹

Snyder made several mistakes during his interview for which he would later apologize and seek forgiveness. As noted by his critics, Snyder's remarks displayed an ignorance of both sport and American society. He left himself open for criticism by insisting that the preponderance of blacks in certain sports resulted from physical differences between the races and not acknowledging that other factors perhaps contributed to the outstanding performances of black athletes. His views that blacks had bigger thighs than their white counterparts would certainly not hold up under scrutiny by physical anthropologists. While blacks suffered cruel indignities during slavery, Snyder's notion of selective reproduction was certainly not one of them. Snyder also did not endear himself to anyone when he claimed that blacks would soon take control of sport.

Perhaps more than anything else, however, Snyder was criticized not so much for what he said, but for what he didn't say. Dorothy Gilliam, a writer for the *Washington Post*, poignantly noted that many people reacted to the "implications and unstated assumptions that lie behind the Greek's statements." Gilliam made it clear that for many people, including individuals like Harry Edwards, the flip side of any discussion about black athletic superiority was the implication that blacks were intellectually inferior. In large part, Snyder's comments were interpreted more as an indictment of black intellectual ability rather than acknowledgement of black athletic superiority.⁵⁰

Genetic Freaks or Well-Trained Gladiators? Continuous Questions in an Unending Debate

The "Snyder bashing," as one writer referred to the incident, was followed by yet another series of comments about possible racial differences and their effects on sport performance. For example, Arthur Ashe recently noted that he would like to see more research completed on the subject. He noted, as he has on a number of occasions, that he thinks blacks are especially gifted at such activities as running.⁵¹ Brooks Johnson, the black track coach as at Stanford, was quoted as saying in a recent edition of the *New York Times*, that the domination of black sprinters reflected "racism in society in general." He compared the instant gratification of sprint races to a sense of urgency felt by many blacks because of their lowly economic conditions. Calvin Hill, the former star football player with the Dallas Cowboys and one of the most frequently quoted athletes on the subject of black athletic superiority, recently

48. "An Oddsmaker's Odd Views." *Sports Illustrated* 68 (January 25, 1988): 7; *New York Times*, January 16, 1988.

49. *New York Times*, January 17, 1988; See also *ibid.*, January 19, 21, 24, 1988.

50. *Washington Post*, January 21, 1988.

51. John Underwood, "On the Playground: Troubling Thoughts about Top Athletes-and too Much Success." *Life* 11 (Spring, 1988), 107. Ashe also comments on the question of black athletic superiority in his recently published book on the history of the black athlete. See Arthur Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the Afro-American Athlete*. 3 vols. (New York, Warner Books, 1989).

inferred in the *Journal of Sport History* that the outstanding performances of black athletes resulted from the large number of positive black role models in particular sports, the emphasis on instant gratification in America's black community, and the fact that black athletes were descendants of the physically gifted slaves who survived the harsh middle passage to this country.⁵² In April, 1988 Tom Brokaw hosted an N.B.C. special devoted to the question of black athletic superiority that included guests such as Harry Edwards, Arthur Ashe, Anthropologist Robert Malina, and Richard Lapchick, Director of the Center for the Study of Sport and Society at Northeastern University. The special received front page headlines in American newspapers and caused widespread reaction that ranged from outright disgust that the program was even aired, to acknowledgement that the subject must be broached if stereotypes were to be eliminated.⁵³

The aforementioned comments are an indication that the subject of black athletic superiority continues to fascinate people from various backgrounds, and that one of the most glaring aspects of the debate down through the years has been the divergent opinions and theories expressed not only between the black and white communities in this country but among the two groups themselves. This is accounted for by the fact that a person's race was seemingly less influential than educational background or any number of other variables in determining their particular philosophy of black athletic superiority. Harry Edwards' position on the subject was, for example, more aligned with Jay Coakley than it was with either Arthur Ashe or Calvin Hill. As academically trained sociologists, Edwards and Coakley could be expected to have different views from the two black athletic stars, possessing perhaps a more critical understanding of American society and better able to understand the reasons for the abject powerlessness of many blacks in this country.

While race seemed to be less influential than other factors in determining an individual's view of black athletic superiority, there seems little question that there were certain trends evident in the comments emanating from within this country's black and white communities, and that the topic had differing ramifications for the two groups. For many in the black community, the overrepresentation of blacks in competitive sport was both a source of pride and concern. On the one hand, black Americans took great satisfaction in the fact that black athletes dominated certain sports because it would give the black community a new sense of dignity and self-esteem, ingredients that were not only inspiring in and of themselves, but necessary components to the ultimate destruction of discrimination in this country. Great black athletes served as role models and could become symbols of possibility, and much needed examples of black achievement. At the same time, the black intelligentsia recognized that success in sport would never completely eradicate the problems of the race. The

52. *New York Times*, July 17, 1988; David Zang, "Calvin Hill Interview," *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter, 1988): 334-355.

53. See *New York Times*, April 26, 1989; *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 27, 1989; *Washington Post*, April 26, 1989; *U.S.A. Today*, April 26, 1989.

preponderance of blacks in competitive sport could possibly delimit the conditions of black identity within American culture and contribute to the stereotypical notion that blacks could excel in physical pursuits, but not in the life of the mind.

White Americans perhaps had even more at stake in the discussion of black athletic superiority. They were both fascinated and troubled by the dominance of black athletes in particular sports. By and large, the dominant culture in this country leaned towards a physiological explanation for black athletic superiority and were reluctant to acknowledge possible sociological reasons for the phenomenon. By acknowledging a physiological basis for black athletic superiority, whites in this country could more easily maintain the broad range of black character they found acceptable and had marked off so carefully. Acknowledgement of physical superiority did nothing to disrupt the feeling among a large segment of the white population that blacks were either docile or savage, faithful or tricky, pathetic or comical, childish or oversexed. In large measure, believing that physical differences accounted for the overrepresentation of black athletes in certain sports seemed quite natural considering that the dominant culture's stereotype of blacks was traditionally opposite to the protestant ethic. The notions of hard work, dedication, and sacrifice were rarely used by white commentators to describe the efforts of such athletes as John B. Taylor, Eddie Tolan, Ralph Metcalfe, Jesse Owens and Isiah Thomas.

Perhaps the best indication of the dominant culture's attitude about black dominance in sport can be gleaned by noting the comparatively little attention paid to the over-representation of white ethnic groups in particular sports throughout American history. Unlike the numerous studies completed on the black athlete, very little time has been given over to questioning such things as the possible physiological basis for the dominance of Irish boxers in the nineteenth century, the high proportion of Jewish basketball players in the early part of the twentieth century, the disproportionate number of Slavic football players in line positions during the 1930s and 1940s, or the one-time dominance of Irish, Jewish, or Italian fighters. There might be occasional comments about the physical strength, speed, or stamina of these athletes, but more often than not their success was accounted for by such factors as low economic background, pride in performance, work habits, intelligence, and the commitment and discipline they brought to each contest. Commentators certainly had stereotypical notions about these athletes, but spoke of them in more complimentary terms than they did black athletes and in a spirit that reflected more fully deeply ingrained American virtues held most dear by the dominant culture.⁵⁴

54. See for example William M. Kramer, and Norton B. Stem, "San Francisco's Fighting Jew," *California Historical Quarterly*, 53 (Winter, 1974): 333-346; Dennis P. Ryan, *Beyond the Ballot Box: A Social History of the Boston Irish, 1845-1917* (Rutherford, NJ.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983); Harold U. Ribalow, *The Jew in American Sports* (New York: Bloch, 1948); Ralph C. Wilcox, "In or Out of the Melting Pot? Sport and the Immigrant in Nineteenth Century America," in *Olympic Scientific Congress. 1984 official Report: Sport History*, ed. Norbert Muller and Joachim K. Ruhl, (Niedernhausen: Schors-Verlag, 1985); Kirson S. Weinberg and Henry Arond, "The Occupational Culture of the Boxer," *American Journal of Sociology* 57 (Winter, 1952): 460-469.



Physical Anthropologist, Robert Malina, has spent much of his career examining the possible physiological differences between the race. (Photo courtesy of the American Alliance for Health, Physical education, recreation, and Dance)

The argument that black athletic superiority was the result of innate physical differences was not only held by some white Americans, but by many blacks as well. Some people in this country's black community expressed the belief that inherent physical differences accounted for the overrepresentation of blacks in certain sports. While racial pride, educational background, social class, and any number of other factors accounted for this reasoning, the fact remains that some blacks tried to explain black athletic superiority along racial lines. Many blacks unthinkingly accepted the ethnic and racial stereotypes created by the dominant culture, and thus helped perpetuate the idea that black athletic superiority was largely the result of physical differences between the races. The notion of race undoubtedly had different connotations for blacks but it was still a convenient way for them to explain the complex phenomenon of black athletic superiority. Perhaps this tells us nothing more than that portions of the black community were similar to their white counterparts in that they were sometimes guilty of prejudicial assumptions and had a penchant for using a simple explanation to account for a phenomenon that was not easily explainable.

For all that, the question still remains: Why are black athletes dominant in certain sports and under-represented in others? Certainly one of the things that can be said with a degree of assurance is that there is no scientific evidence of genetic association or linkage between genes for individual and group athletic achievement among black Americans. We know as little about the contribution of genes to athletic ability as we do about the genetics of intelligence. Athletic ability is clearly a function of many genes in interaction with a number of other variables such as economic background, motivation, facilities, and coaching. How many genes may be involved in athletic ability is difficult, if not impossible, to determine since there is no way to separate out the contributions made by the aforementioned variables to sport performance.

Drawing links between genetic makeup and athletic ability is highly suspect, moreover, because as Cobb, Edwards, and other academicians have made plain through the years, it is highly questionable whether there is such a thing as a racial group considering the enormous lack of racial homogeneity within this country's black and white communities. The anthropometric differences found between racial groups are usually nothing more than central tendencies and, in addition, do not take into account wide variations within these groups or the overlap among members of different races. This fact not only negates any reliable physiological comparisons of athletes along racial lines, but makes the whole notion of racially distinctive physiological abilities a moot point.

The weight of the evidence indicates that the differences between participation patterns of black and white athletes is primarily due to differences in the history of experiences that individuals and their particular racial group have undergone. Blacks in this country have traditionally not enjoyed equal cultural and socioeconomic opportunities, having been oppressed, discriminated against, impoverished, and generally excluded from the good things in life. The result is that blacks have shown both a preference and inclination for different sports than their white counterparts. The lack of other job opportunities is partly

to blame for the considerable importance attached to sport by many black Americans. The lower class black community's religious fervor for sport is directly proportional to the disillusionment it feels over inadequate employment opportunities. If blacks place a decided premium on physical virtuosity through sport, as many people have claimed, it is caused more by their particular station in life than by any hereditary factors.

Lacking money and access to certain equipment and facilities has guaranteed that black athletes will focus their attention on certain accessible sports and disregard others. It takes very little in the way of equipment and facilities to participate in basketball and track and field, while such activities as golf and tennis demand resources that are out of reach for a majority of blacks. The participation patterns of black athletes has also remained remarkably similar through the years largely because of the stereotyping of black athletes by the dominant culture and the fact that younger blacks tend to emulate and follow in the footsteps of their athletic forebears. There is no reason to believe this situation will change in the near future. The economic plight of black Americans has not changed dramatically enough nor has the basic structure of organized sport evolved to the point where black athletes would suddenly find themselves overrepresented in golf and excluded from basketball.

The continued overrepresentation of black athletes in particular sports will certainly continue to draw attention from academicians and various other people in society. Let us trust that these people will not treat black athletes as though a stereotype were sufficient and as though the individual could be ignored. This would only contribute to a continued escape from the consideration of the effect of social and economic inequities upon black sport participation and insistence on attributing the outstanding performances of black athletes to inherent racial differences. The spirit of science necessitates, however, that academicians continue their research to determine if the success of black athletes is somehow the consequence of racially distinctive chromosomes. The worst thing to happen would be for researchers to refrain from examining the possible physical differences between black and white athletes for fear that they would be transgressing an established political line or be labeled a racist. Like all areas of research, the topic of black athletic superiority needs to be examined from a broad perspective and not from a preconceived and narrowly focused vantage point. If the truth is to be known about outstanding black athletic performances scholars need to investigate the topic from a bio-social perspective while at once recognizing the inequities in our pluralistic society and acknowledging that the overrepresentation of black athletes in certain sports had its counterpart among white athletes who excelled in their own activities without fear of being branded as genetic freaks.