

# The Negro Athlete and Race Prejudice

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• By EDWIN BANCROFT HENDERSON

WILL history record the Negro athlete a significant factor in the moderation of racial prejudice in America? \$s our Negro athlete contributing much to an all-round New Deal for the Negro group?

On one Sunday morning three years ago, the names of two black boys made great headlines on the first page of many of America's great conservative newspapers,— including the New York Times. Their pictures glared from millions of front page copies of the world's press. Since then, news columns, sporting sections, and editorial comments have referred to Negro athletic achievement more than to any other artistic, political or educational phase of Negro life.

Sociologists are questioning the extent that this interest in the Negro athlete is affecting race prejudices. Another interesting question is,— how have Negro boys made progress against the tide of race prejudice to reach the goals they have attained?

Athletics, in the main, begin with school life. In the South, after we leave the border states, are found the poorest of schools, and in a sampling survey made by the writer, there was found to be practically no physical education programs or athletics in schools for Negroes below the college level. The separate school systems provide little beyond the tool subjects, not much progressive curriculum material, but frequently a lot of worn out traditional educational content largely discarded by contemporary school systems. Time allotment and provision for plays, games, and other socializing educational media are absent in the great mass of Negro schools. However, the great trek of Negroes northward, put a generation of colored boys in the schools of the more liberal states. There, the physical education programs gave them their chance. That they make the teams is due to rugged abilities, social adaptiveness, and the desire of the coach or school to gain prestige through athletics with its accompanying personal or institutional appraisal.

To make a success in team athletics, the colored boy must be definitely superior. Sometimes color aids him by marking him conspicuously in the course of the activity but frequently it identifies him as the bull's eye for the shafts of the opposition. He must make adjustments in realization of the prejudices of team mates, and must learn to "take plenty" from opponents. Often he must find separate lodgement when on

What effect, if any, will the rise of a galaxy of great Negro champions in sport have upon racial attitudes? Do Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Metcalfe, Threadgill, Peacock, Johnson, Burke, etc., contribute toward racial tolerance?

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tour. He must survive the humiliation of being left behind when his team plays the "Service" schools or the gentlemen of the South. In most such cases, he will receive a compensatory good will gesture as an effort of the coach to offset the humiliation.

As examples of this, although Rivero of Columbia, a fifteen year New York "Cuban," did play at Annapolis, Bell of Ohio State was denied play in the game with the Navy at Annapolis, and warmed the bench when Duke opponents ran all over the substitute for Bell in that game. Big "Bill" was allowed to smash his way to fame against the Navy eleven, however, when it travelled to the West. Robinson, the sensational end on Oregon's team a few years' back, was awarded full expenses for a vacation trip to Washington, D. C., when his team played the inter-sectional tilt with Florida in the sunny South. Once, after an afternoon of splendid performance as members of the almost all colored Amherst track team, Charlie Drew, Montague Cobb, and Bill Hastie were handed a few dollars and told to look up a meal in a New England town that was short of hostelries free from color prejudice.

Without superior blockers to get him away from the maelstrom of the opposing line and backs, Red Grange would have been just another ice-man. To dim the lustre of a star Negro back, it is only necessary for a blocker to conveniently fail at his job occasionally. That Ossie Simmons would get his team's support during the past season became an item of publicity, and that he performed so well was due to the support he did get despite being behind a line not up to the charging strength of some opposing teams. It is also a fact not generally known that where "scholarships" are the means by which many a poor boy gets to and stays in college for athletics, some of the bigger scouting colleges make it a policy not to subsidize college life for more than one good colored athlete per team.

Our professional or money-seeking athletes in the profit making game are up against different problems. Backers and promoters are openly in the game for money. If the color of an athlete is a financial factor of importance, or if he is an exceptional athlete, despite his color, he will

be sought and used wherever the mores of the community are not taboo to colored athletes. In the body-to-body contact of the wrestling racket, where even mayhem is not too severely condemned and serves to whip up the jaded nerves of the tired, dissipated or calloused spectators, and where riots are always imminent, the Negro wrestler has little chance to break into the game. The writer witnessed a bout, here in Washington, in which Chief Little Wolf won over a local favorite by the gentle application of his famous "death-lock" hold. Shouts of "Kill that N——," "You're no Indian, just plain N——," caused the police to escort the wrestler from the ring. On the other hand "Tiny" Roebuck and other Indians have been favorites even in the far South. Although all contact games have the capacity to stimulate the fiercer emotions, the present-day rules of the boxing game and short bouts have put a premium on skill, strength, timing and endurance and probably limits the expression of instinctive responses of rage and prejudiced hate. In this as in some other sports, promoters frequently find color an asset, and are inclined to depend a great deal upon the growing sense of American spectator sportsmanship. In some southern cities, the local fight promoters have begun to use colored fighters in non-mixed bouts on the same card with white fighters. In Missouri, the boxing ban against mixed bouts has been lifted.

Negro pugilists, listing from the days of Moli-neaux, Tom Richmond, down through Peter Jackson, Andy Bowen, George Dixon, Joe Gans and Jack Johnson have captivated public fancy. At one time, some of these early day pugilists hobnobbed with royalty and men of letters at the sporting taverns in London. Jack Johnson, like Frederick Douglass, lost much of his white and colored following by marrying across the color line, but despite this and numerous escapades in and out of the law he still has a host of well wishing admirers. Kid Chocolate, Tiger Flowers, and now Joe Louis have helped increase tolerance and respect for Negro peoples by the great mass of Americans whose social behavior is modified more through their feelings and the thrills they experience than by recourse to principles of reasoning with regard to race. The acclaim given Joe Louis is too recent to need to point out sociological implications.

Professional all-colored basketball teams find it possible, and occasionally a paying venture, to play white teams as far south as Washington, D. C. Football professionals are finding expression and compensation by playing on or with white "Pro-teams." Negroes, to get into big league baseball must yet awhile be light enough

in color to be signed as an Indian, Cuban, or Far-southerner. Barnstorming "big leaguers" do not disdain playing against good colored-Pros" when the gate pays. As yet the Negro has knocked but lightly at the door of tennis, golf or swimming; but here again, facilities, training, and competition are needed to add to the number of real performers in these sports.

During the past year there has hardly been a sports commentator or columnist who has not advanced some reason for the unprecedented rise of Negro track and field athletes. For the last ten to twenty years, Negro broad jumpers have practically dominated the records in this event. Only two white athletes and one Japanese have excelled in this event. Theorists, many of them honest, have attempted to prove that Negro athletes were endowed with some peculiar anatomical structure of foot, leg or thigh that enables them to run or jump better than white athletes. Dr. Montague Cobb, associate professor of Anatomy at Howard University, in studies undertaken at the laboratory of Ohio State University, has shown with painstaking research, tests, and x-rays of the body of Jesse Owens that the measurements of Owens fall within the accepted measurements of white men.

Prejudiced thinking as to race and athletic success has served to stimulate further poisoned-pen comments from men like Brisbane of the Hearst press. Brisbane has a wont to compare athletes with "Grizzlies" or gorillas whenever an outstanding Negro athlete looms on the horizon. Recently, a story of Louis' great grandparent overcoming a baboon in a wrestling match on a slave farm in Alabama became a current press fable to account for the descent of strength to Louis. Several generations ago when the dark continent was invaded by explorers, the hunt was on for the "Missing Link," or the man-monkey. If slave-traders and exploiters could have satisfied the world that the Negro was on the border line between man and beast, this would have been justification for his classification as a beast of burden to be worked, enslaved or starved with only the compunction that Christians have been inspired with by the principles of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The implications of the hunt for the missing link of the 18th century have their counterpart in those of the Brisbanalities of the present day "Negrophobiacs."

General Hugh Johnson dismisses the question as to Negro supremacy in his brusque language by saying, "They're just too physical for us." Dr. Cobb has scientifically disproved the one and twenty theories that Negro athletes have peculiar anatomical structures. Therefore, the writer's

guess is as good as some others. When one recalls that it is estimated that only one Negro slave in five was able to live through the rigors of the "Middle Passage," and that the horrible conditions of slavery took toll of many slaves who could not make biological adjustments in a hostile environment, one finds the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fit operating among Negroes as rigorously as any selective process ever operated among human beings. There is just a likelihood that some very vital elements persist in the histological tissues of the glands or muscles of Negro athletes.

It is the belief of many students of race phenomena that the Negro athlete is making a considerable contribution to the spread of tolerance and improved race relations. Negro artisans and some intellectuals have risen to high planes of social relationships with individuals of other races through the recognition of values that transcend the physical. But the mass of humanity still is motivated by feelings and emotions. The main springs of action are still located in the glands. Fear, love and hate determine attitudes towards neighbors or foreigners. Our keenest pleasures and most poignant pains are born of feelings rather than of intellect. The whole biological history of man is recorded somewhere in these histological structures of the human glands and behavior patterns are recalled when the secretions of these glands seep into the blood.

Even the most intellectual, no matter how far we strive to appreciate sophisticated music, non-understandable art symbols, or high values in literature, we still respond readily to the call of the chase, the fight, the race or the hunt and live over something of our early ancestral experiences when we thrill or despair with the runner, boxer or other athlete. The world still loves a fighter, whether he be the winner or loser.

Joe Louis has thus captivated the fancy of millions. He is to some a symbolic Sphinx of Egypt or a human replica of Rodin's "Thinker." In the ring he associates ideas and responds with lightning-life rapier thrusts about as rapidly through the medium of mind and muscle as an

Einstein calculates cause and effect in cosmic theory. Jesse Owens, Metcalf, Tolan, and a host of others have likewise provided a feeling of pride and joyful relationship for many. These athletes are American athletes. They claim the loyalty of the thousands of students at this or that university. They are emulated by thousands of growing youth of all races, and above all they gain for themselves and the Negro the respect of millions whose superiority feelings have sprung solely from identity with the white race.

If Negro athletes do contribute to racial respect, and despite its nature, it is conceded by many that they do, then it behooves educators and racial agencies for uplift to make greater social use of athletics. Every opportunity for extending the games and plays of the physical education program of schools should be a part of education for Negroes. School teachers of little one-room school houses can encourage practice in a variety of activities by which the qualities known collectively as good sportsmanship as well as the skills can be learned by Negro youth. More happiness may be brought into the lives of the less-privileged, and at the same time we will be developing future good-will ambassadors through athletics.

Finally since education has come to realize that living wholesomely and more completely today is a better way of preparing for life tomorrow, and that to train the mind alone is exactly the same as the method of the dark-age scholasticism in which the soul alone was worth developing or saving, education through the physical is being given a large place. Educators and sociologists recognize that the whole organism must react completely and well to its environment if the greater happiness is to come to individuals and society. Joe Louis and Jesse Owens are but symbols of a modern return to the golden age of Greece when education was begun in play, and the years that passed were measured in Olympiads. Negroes can do well by cultivating their birthright of the spirit of play and good humor and by maintaining the heritage of a physical vigor that civilization may be draining from its bleached sons and daughters.

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