

## **Remarks of Bruce L. Bennett on the Occasion of the Dedication of the Plaque Honoring Edwin Bancroft Henderson at the Providence Recreation Center, Falls Church, Virginia on April 25, 1982**

I was delighted to have Dr. James Henderson call me several weeks ago and extend the very kind invitation to participate in this happy occasion on this lovely afternoon. I can assure you that although it is a beautiful day outside, there is no place that I would rather be than inside right here.

I am serving as a representative or spokesman for the North American Society for Sport History. This society, at its very first meeting in 1973, elected Edwin Bancroft Henderson as one of two honorary presidents in recognition of his contributions to the field of sport history. His first book, *The Negro in Sports*, published in 1939 and revised ten years later, stands out as a landmark in the history of the black athlete. His later writings and publications further enhanced his reputation as a scholar and historian.

My first personal acquaintance with Mr. Henderson goes back to 1970 when one of my graduate students at Ohio State University, Leon Coursey, came to me to discuss a topic for his doctoral dissertation. He was interested in a biographical study of some black physical educator. I said that the outstanding black person was without question Edwin B. Henderson, but at that time I had no idea where he was living or even if he was still alive. Several weeks later, Mr. Coursey came bursting into my office full of enthusiasm to say that Mr. Henderson was indeed alive and well and living in Tuskegee, Alabama. This was the start of his doctoral study on Mr. Henderson, and I am pleased to see a copy of this excellent work on display in the book case in the lobby.

A year later the Big Ten universities and The Athletic Institute authorized a Big Ten Symposium on the History of Physical Education and Sport to be held at Ohio State University in March, 1971. I and my colleague, Dr. Seymour Kleinman, were appointed program and convention managers. We selected nine topics of historical interest for the program, one being the Black Athlete in Sports. We then considered who would be the best qualified person to invite to talk on each topic. There was no question that Edwin B. Henderson should give the paper on the black athlete. Our plan was to request each speaker to stay for the full two-and-a-half days of the seminar so that there could be maximum interaction between the speakers and the delegates. When I called Mr. Henderson to invite him to come, he was 88 years of age and would try to fly from Alabama to Columbus. I informed him of our general wishes but said that in his case we would consent to any arrangement that would be best for him. Thus, he could just stay for one day and return home

right after his talk. There was silence at the other end of the line for a moment, and then he said, “I think that I would like to stay for the entire time.” This is exactly what he did, and he was the darling of the symposium. None of the other participants had ever met him before, and it was a wonderful occasion to meet, become personally acquainted, and talk sport history. I know that it was a rich and meaningful experience for Mr. Henderson who finally got some of the recognition from fellow sport historians that he richly deserved and had missed for most of his life.

Mr. Henderson’s plane was due in Columbus at 3 p.m., and Mr. Coursey was to meet him at the airport. However, unbeknownst to us, he made an earlier connection in Atlanta, and arrived in Columbus four hours early. He did not call any one to let us know of the change, and so he sat in the airport the entire four hours. Spending four hours in the Columbus airport was not the ideal introduction to our fair city!

May I conclude my presentation by selecting two quotations from the excellent paper which Mr. Henderson presented at the Big Ten Symposium.

I would like to call attention to my use of the term “Negro” instead of “Black.” This designation has been of much controversy. There are those who would use the adjective “Colored.” Others use the name “Afro-American” to indicate at least one African ancestor. . . . Then there are those who like to think of themselves as just Americans. Black may instill pride in some Negroes but to many, regardless of name, a rose by any other name is still a rose.<sup>1</sup>

Toward the end of this paper he declared:

It has been my feeling that athletics has done more to bring Negroes into the main stream of our American Society than possibly any other medium. They create tolerance from the prejudiced, and then fellowship. . . . To a large extent this carries over to the class rooms and into other life situations.<sup>2</sup>

I would say to you today that Edwin Bancroft Henderson was a unique rose—without thorns—in the garden of humanity, and the dedication of this plaque in this impressive recreation center is a most appropriate and fitting way to perpetuate the memory and the beautiful spirit of this great person.

## Notes

1. Edwin B. Henderson, “Physical Education and Athletics Among Negroes,” in Bruce L. Bennett, ed., *Proceedings of the Big Ten Symposium on the History of Physical Education and Sport* (Chicago: The Athletic Institute, 1972), p. 72.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 82.