

Communications

To the Editor:

The Journal of Sport History is to be congratulated on its recent special issue, "The Black Athlete in American Sports." Guest editor David Wiggins selected five excellent scholarly articles and a most interesting interview with Calvin Hill to highlight major questions involving black athletes. Taken together with Wiggins' article on the debate over black athletic superiority which appeared in the following issue of *JSH* and Gerald Gems's interpretative essay on the segregation of the National Football League, which appeared at about the same time in the *P.F.R.A. Annual 1988* the bulletin of the Professional Football Research Association, the complete package represents a bonanza for those interested in black sports.

If one could distill the various selections down to one or two overriding themes or focuses, the issues of integration and the emergence of the black athlete as a powerful force in today's intercollegiate and professional sports stand out. The essays, including Gems's selection are of high quality because they do not offer simplistic reasons for the persistence of racism in American sports or its later relative demise. It was once fashionable, among some whites at least, to credit Branch Rickey with the re-integration of major league baseball without recognizing the black players, fans, writers, or Civil Rights organizations which created the conditions for Mr. Rickey to act. Most of these essays tie the issues confronting black athletes to the larger questions of civil rights and racial progress in the larger society. Thomas G. Smith in his essay on the segregation within the NFL from 1934-46, for example, carefully weighs the factors that contributed to the exclusion of blacks from the senior pro football circuit and the forces that eventually broke down the racial barrier. Similarly, David Wiggins provides a carefully balanced account of the arguments both for and against the proposition that blacks dominate certain sports because of genetic traits. This kind of careful analysis accompanied by painstaking research is characteristic of all the selections.

Having heaped well-deserved praise on the guest editor and the authors, I would like to present a wish list of some questions or themes that I would have liked to have seen discussed or addressed. In so doing, I am well aware that editors are constrained by the materials submitted to them, deadlines, space limitations, etc., but here goes. Given the continental-wide scope of the North American Society for Sport History, it would have been enlightening to have had an analysis of race in sport from a Canadian perspective. Was there discrimination against blacks in Canadian college or professional sports? Were black athletes treated better or worse than, say, the native (Indian) minority? In

general, was the experience of the United States with regard to segregation or integration of athletics similar or different from other western nations? In addition, the question of skin color and integration might have been more forcefully addressed. It is quite probable, for example, that Jackie Robinson was not the first African-American to play major league baseball in the twentieth century. Many black Americans, however that term may be defined, "passed" for white or Indian, and participated in intercollegiate or professional sports in the first decades of this century. One of the reasons that Jackie Robinson made such a great impact on the American public was that no one ever confused Robinson with being anything but black. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, most of the important black athletes were light-skinned and thus somehow more acceptable to white officials and fans. It was darker-skinned blacks such as Jack Johnson, Paul Robeson, or Fritz Pollard, who were the real targets and pioneers.

Although the collection of essays touches on individuals and their courage in confronting racism in athletics, most of the selections analyze social or institutional problems rather than people. In my view, such an approach, carried too far, obscures the fact that individual athletes through training, dedication, and courage were responsible for assaulting and eventually surmounting the racial barriers in American sports. More careful biographical studies of black athletes will reveal, I am convinced, that African-Americans have and do succeed in some athletic events because of high motivation, hard work, and persistence rather than any innate physical skill. Two other issues or areas that need more attention in trying to explain the progress of the black athlete during the inter-war years are sports at the black colleges and the development of the Afro-American press, and especially the sports section. The advancement of these two institutions between the two world wars may explain much about the rapid advancement of blacks in sports after 1945.

Putting the wish list aside, I would like to thank David Wiggins and the contributors for raising important questions about the role of the black athlete and racism in American society. I also hope that other sports historians will be inspired to pursue additional research in this important field.

Lamar University

John M. Carroll

To the Editor:

I would like to thank Professor John Carroll for his thoughtful and very complimentary letter concerning the special issue of the *Journal of Sport History* devoted to the involvement of black athletes in American sport. It is always heartening to know that someone has actually read what you have written and quite flattering when people are moved to the point where they actually take the time to respond in writing to your scholarly efforts. I hope

others found the issue worthwhile and thought provoking, and that it will stimulate additional research on the black athlete.

I have no significant disagreements with Professor Carroll's wish list. I too, think the issue would have been strengthened if an essay had been included which touched upon race relations and sport in Canadian society. As I have argued in a previous publication, I believe it is important for researchers to analyze the role of the black athlete from a comparative perspective in much the same way as Frank Tannenbaum examined slavery. This type of research might provide further insights into the sporting patterns and racial realities of various cultures and at the same time raise important questions that would further illuminate the shared experiences of black athletes. Professor Carroll's call for more attention to sport in black colleges and the relationship of the black press to sport is also well taken. There is little question in my mind that an accurate portrayal of the black athletes' involvement in sport during the inter-war years can only be realized through a more thorough analysis of sport at historically black colleges and in well known black newspapers. Unfortunately, as Professor Carroll himself acknowledges, editors are always constrained by the types of materials submitted to them. In this particular case, no articles were submitted that touched upon either Canadian sport, the role of sport in black colleges, or the portrayal of sport in black newspapers.

In regards to Professor Carroll's comments about the issue's emphasis on social or institutional problems rather than individual athletes, I must confess that I was hoping for the submission of quality articles that dealt with systematic racism and institutionalized constraints on the black athlete. Although I believe that biographical studies are crucially important in understanding black athletes, I think they need to be counterbalanced with more works that talk about the collective struggles of blacks and are cognizant of the fact that the racial discrimination experienced by black athletes was not arbitrary and individually based, but systematic and patterned. For too long, in my opinion, scholars have told stories of black athletes who courageously surmounted racial barriers in American sport and failed to point out that these individual achievements could never completely eradicate the barriers faced by blacks because the rights and privileges of individuals in American society depended largely upon the status of the group to which they belonged.

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David K. Wiggins