

BOOK FORUM

A Proportionate and Measured Response to the Provocation That is *Darwin's Athletes*

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Darwin's Athletes is an important book and no doubt one that must be taken seriously, though not so much for its intrinsic worth as for the wide and often laudatory attention it has received. John Hoberman, to his credit, has addressed in one place many of the most pressing and daunting issues that sport presents to people of African descent throughout the world. If nothing else, the book demonstrates something that has become increasingly clear to me: that the most interesting, revealing, and sensitive discussions of race take place around the arena of sport. It is in that arena that notions of difference, often carrying qualitative judgments on alleged racial superiority and inferiority, are inscribed, reinforced, internalized, and contested.

Through Jackie Robinson, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Althea Gibson, Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Wilma Rudolph, and Tiger Woods, to name a few, we have engaged the issue of race and its intersection with gender and class around questions of integration, violence, resistance, identity, sexuality, creativity, and aptitude. Hoberman mostly reminds us of, rather than introduces us to, the negative dimensions and consequences of the African American sportive experience. For him, it is nothing but a long and sorry history, largely without redeeming features of any kind. And this is the essence of *Darwin's Athletes*, a one-sided, relentless, and accusatory document that approaches the definition of polemic. Thus, for all of the light it sheds on the disturbing implications of sport for blacks, Hoberman's account itself is even more disturbing and extremely disappointing.

To begin with, *Darwin's Athletes* is too expansive. If the author's reach does not exceed his grasp, there is no doubt that necessary depth is sacrificed for breadth. Ranging far and wide in time, space, and subject matter, Hoberman, especially

in the first of the book's three parts, can only make whistle-stops in precolonial Africa, early America, colonial Africa and other parts of the African Diaspora before returning to contemporary Europe, Africa, and America. In these diverse settings, Hoberman treats all manner of subjects, from "African" child-rearing practices to American slave adaptive strategies to black learning styles to hip hop to black Greek-letter organizations to African American pathology to black history, literature, and science (or lack thereof). From this intellectual tour, we get mostly snapshots, often out of focus and without adequate legends. One might argue that *Darwin's Athletes* is three books in one: The first is a scattershot examination of the sociocultural and intellectual dimensions of blacks and sport and a harsh condemnation of the black elite Hoberman holds responsible for promoting black overinvestment in athletics; the second is a treatment of sport in a colonial context, which suffers from its failure to get inside the minds of the subjects it discusses; the third is a more focused and developed exploration of science, from the good to the bad to the pseudo, in relation to sport and race, drawing heavily on Hoberman's foreshadowing work *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport*, which contains a chapter titled "Darwin's Athletes: The 'Savage' and the 'Civilized' Body." An ironic twist to Hoberman's expansive approach is its similarity to that of the Afrocentrists he so roundly condemns as a "lunatic fiinge" (p. 46). Both share a willingness to ignore time, space, and the dynamics of cultural transmission in the production of reductionist and essentialist projects. Moreover, both rely on secondary sources and often show an utter lack of concern for detachment, balance, and objectivity—the putative standards of serious scholarship.

Darwin's Athletes should cause the rare, resourceful, intrepid, and resilient reader who can finish it—a difficult intellectual test of endurance and sacrifice—to depart with puzzlement about the author's intentions and, perhaps, his politics. Does he believe that being provocative, especially at the expense of blacks, will sell books? Or does he really believe that he is the objective and honest outsider who is free, willing, and able to comment on that which escapes, frightens, controls, or benefits those intellectuals on the inside? Or is he venting pent-up resentment for some profound wrong inflicted on him by blacks? Or is he using the black athletic experience as an object lesson for understanding the extent of the evil of the global capitalist sports empire? How is it that a book that is so right on so many issues can, in sum, be so disappointing and, at times, offensive? I will turn my attention to the last question, which should encompass those that precede it.

From the outset, Hoberman reveals resentment. Presenting himself as an academic Larry Bird, a white man in a black game, the author first accuses his black students of chauvinism: "I have seen my share of angry, suspicious, or transfixed faces as I have scraped the bottom of the racist barrel to show where ethnic folklore comes from" (pp. xi-xii). But Hoberman does not find such alleged attitudes solely the creature of young and underdeveloped black minds; he somehow anticipates, intuitively, or hears prior to publication that there are some who believe that "a black scholar should have written a book like *Darwin's*

Athletes" (p. xii). To strengthen his argument and generalize the problem, he cites an unnamed black historian who asserted that whites study black history to benefit their careers. Similarly, Hoberman uses the words of another nameless black writer who maintains that whites who analyze black problems are professional critics of black character (p. xii).

Hoberman denies any such motives, for his interest is professedly altruistic: the pursuit of truth and the furtherance of racial healing. For him, "the social costs associated with the athleticizing of black life remain unaddressed because sober and unsentimental analysis of black cultural preferences will inevitably appear as racist denigration to some people." (Note the word "preferences," which denotes choice and suggests viable options.) *Darwin's Athletes* is not, in Hoberman's mind, "racist denigration" or "an alien intrusion to black life" because unlike the claims of the misguided authors of *The Bell Curve* and like-minded blacks, he believes it is essential "to assess the beliefs or behavior of the clan in relation to other norms, which might find them deficient or even dangerous" (p. 10). All of which sounds eerily similar to D'Souza's *The End of Racism*. Thus, Hoberman would have us believe that his outsider vantage point and twenty-five years of sport scholarship uniquely position and equip him to bring necessary cross-cultural perspectives to the study of black problems related to athletics. He also maintains that, with the decline in the number of black males pursuing doctorates, there are likely to be fewer black scholars to take on such a project. Moreover, he doubts "that any black intellectual would choose to write so critically about the impact of athletic achievement on African American life." While ostensibly not wanting to bolster the views of "self-defeating" separatists who see such scholarship as evidence of the "'growing black pathology business'" among white scholars, Hoberman's work confirms their worst fears and most dire predictions (p. xiii).

From my vantage point, the problem is an inversion of Hoberman's emphasis on black racism and intellectual provincialism. A more common reality finds those few blacks who have forced their way into the academy and its discussions typecast as identity scholars and not often taken seriously in fields unrelated to their "race" or experience. It is unreasonable to expect that they should accept a condition in which whites can speak to everybody and everything but they can only speak to themselves. Perhaps Hoberman might have referred to the influential and lasting views of W.E.B. DuBois rather than the spirit of Spike Lee, who maintained that only a black man could do Malcolm X. For DuBois, in criticizing a white author who failed to comprehend his subject, explained: "I do not say that the only person who can write of England must be an Englishman, or that only Japanese should write of Japan; but I would insist that if a person is writing of a group to which he is socially and culturally alien, he must have some extraordinary gifts of insight."¹ To DuBois's caveat I would add, with all due respect, sensitivity. But DuBois has another lesson for Hoberman's privileging of critical distance:

I do not for a moment doubt that my Negro descent and narrow group culture have in many cases predisposed me to interpret my facts too

favorably for my race; but there is little danger of long misleading here, for the champions of white folk are legion. The Negro has long been the clown of history; the football of anthropology; and the slave of industry. I am trying to show here why these attitudes can no longer be maintained. I realize that the truth of history lies not in the mouths of partisans but rather in the calm Science that sits between. Her cause I seek to serve, and wherever I fail, I am at least paying Truth the respect of earnest effort.²

Although there is no question that Hoberman has a deep knowledge of the scholarship on sport, aided by his multilingual skills, he falls woefully short as a qualified commentator on the black experience, and his “critical distance” too often betrays ignorance. Both the necessary insight and sensitivity are absent. *Darwin’s Athletes* is at once marred and betrayed by a serious problem of tone—at once accusatory and superior. It is the tone of the expert observer with all the answers, the trained eye who can pass judgment, and the self-righteous abstainer who can impose values. In his condemnatory tone, he arrogates the authority of identity as his voice replaces that of the black middle class, which cannot-or refuses to-articulate what, in his view, it should and must. That is not the only problem with Hoberman’s condescending, top-down approach. For no one who employs this method, in which there is no attempt to explore the minds and hear the voices of those he speaks about, can adequately address the reality under examination. Moreover, despite the male domination of sport and male-centered debates that have devalued and marginalized female athletes and the issues that surround them, there cannot be a responsible treatment of blacks and sport that does not speak adequately to women and gender relations and roles. This is to say nothing of the near total neglect of white athletic culture, which includes criminality, sexism, racism, drug abuse, and all of the other evils that Hoberman seems to suggest are the sole province of black males.

The problem of tone, sensitivity, and insight culminate at the end of the preface when Hoberman sharpens his sights and takes dead aim at those he views as at least partly responsible for the problem of athletic overdetermination among blacks and silent about its consequences—the “black intelligentsia” (p. xiii). A black middle class (and its intelligentsia) that “remains infatuated with sports cannot campaign effectively against racial stereotyping that preserves the black man’s physicality as a sign of his inherent limitations” (p. xxv). Never mind the value-laden language and the unproven assumptions expressed here, for throughout the text Hoberman puts the so-called black middle class and its intelligentsia in the difficult position of having to speak for, to, and against their more disadvantaged kin, who have their own stories to tell, lives to live, and values to respect. Hoberman’s self-righteous lecturing seems to be a classic case of blaming the victims, a note on which he ends his study: “Today, however, black eugenics comes at a very high price, for it is the black athlete, the product of another ‘unnatural selection’ and the most celebrated representative of black creativity, who carries the torch of eugenic advancement for his people. His tragedy is that he can neither advance nor lead his race in the modern world” (p. 242). The placement of this warning cum indictment is not unintentional. It is a loud

and powerful parting shot, resounding the earliest messages while muffling those that come between. Indeed, the power and danger of *Darwin's Athletes* is more related to positioning, tone, and emphasis than it is to substance.

Darwin's Athletes is an insidious work that allies itself with a black icon, sets itself up in opposition to avowed and extremist external enemies of blacks, and adopts black internal enemies as the wrongly stifled and condemned messengers of truth. As such, Hoberman cleverly uses and hides behind others in delivering hostile blows in the guise of altruism. Shamelessly, Hoberman dedicates his book to the memory of Ralph Ellison, known by most for his condemnation of racism in *Invisible Man* and by few for his contribution to the notion of black pathology. Unfortunately, Hoberman characteristically offers an important insight but undermines it through distortion, elevating Ellison's statements into a generalizable theory on black cultural deprivation. Hoberman follows that dedication with an epigraph from Ellison's *Shadow and Act*. "I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant." That same quote appears without apparent logic as a parenthetical comment to Hoberman's contention that "ideas about racial athletic aptitude reign virtually uncontested outside the small number of classrooms in which they are examined" (pp. xiv-xv). After bonding with Ellison, Hoberman embraces Shelby Steele, Orlando Patterson, and Glenn Loury, three of America's most conservative black intellectuals. Steele, who clearly suffers a crisis of identity compounded by feelings of intellectual inadequacy, is, in part, responsible for the Right's appropriation of Martin Luther King's challenge to white people that others be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. Out of Ring's mouth the phrase invoked equality, but after the publication of Steele's *The Content of Our Character*, King's words became instruments of oppression, namely in the war against affirmative action and race-based remedies of past and current discrimination. Despite such an outcome, Hoberman tells us that Steele shows "painstaking diplomacy" in his book and suggests that the black opposition to it is unfounded and somehow related to Steele's criticism of black athleticism, which he sees as part of a larger "'compensatory grandiosity'" that includes the "'magnificent egotism of Muhammad Ali'" (p. 89). Hoberman should seek out the reviews of Steele's work by Adolph Reed and Patricia Williams, who both find it not only dangerous but vacuous, a work that offers the anecdotal and impressionistic as meaningful and generalizable scholarship.³

Then he turns to Orlando Patterson, the Jamaican-born Harvard sociologist who criticizes Afrocentric vanities that can easily degenerate "'into a vulgar exoticism,'" including "'inverted racist claims of sexual potency . . . [and] a crass wallowing in none too 'noble savagery'" (p. 89). Hoberman does not tell us that Patterson took Clarence Thomas's side against Anita Hill mainly because he believed that Thomas's actions and words were products of southern black culture and that the punishment—a derailed nomination—would be out of proportion to the crime. This is to say nothing of Patterson's belief that outward signs of racial hatred, tension, and conflict signal contact, the first step toward accommodation and assimilation. His is an astonishing attachment to a dated sociological model put forth by the Chicago School of Sociologists in the 1920s.⁴

His last overtly conservative ally is Glenn Loury, described only as an economist and social critic, who weighs in on violence, black male demonization, and “the pernicious chauvinism that leads a black to feel himself superior in view of the demographic composition of the NBA” (pp. xviii, 4, 89). Evidently, either bad editing or strong convictions have led Hoberman to cite the exact quote from Loury twice. Hoberman neglects to mention Loury’s close ties to the Reagan administration and his former affiliation with the American Enterprise Institute the conservative think tank that subsidized D’Souza’s *The End of Racism*. Nor does he discuss Loury’s own character problems.

Hoberman’s scholarship alternates between intellectual consciousness and utter fantasy. One moment he offers lucid, incisive insights and in the next he makes almost hallucinogenic leaps of interpretation and speculation, despite his claims of sobriety and unsentimentality. For a subject that requires the delicate touch of a brain surgeon, Hoberman applies the butcher’s cleaver in what amounts to an academic hatchet job. Hoberman does very little to consider the Hobson’s Choices that blacks have faced. They have tried to work the system, like other oppressed groups, “to their minimum disadvantage.”⁵ A more sober mind would ask how blacks constructively reconcile the attraction of sport with the structural inequity that surrounds it. Until other arenas at least appear to be as open as sport, the problem will persist. Hoberman’s unwillingness to discuss this issue is indicative of his one-dimensional treatment.

Similarly, although there is much merit to Hoberman’s contention that black participation in, and dominance of, certain sports can confirm “ideas about the ‘natural’ physical talents of dark-skinned peoples . . . and probably do more than anything else in our public life to encourage the idea that blacks and whites are biologically different in a meaningful way,” even this contention ignores Hoberman’s own evidence about the differentiating effects of exclusion (p. xiv). For he offers, in seeming contradiction, the view of golfing legend Jack Nicklaus, who employs “an eccentric racial biology to rationalize the absence of black athletes in a segregated country club sport” (p. xvii). There the absence of blacks, perhaps coupled with their over-representation and dominance in other sports, gives powerful testimony to alleged difference. A clearer example of how exclusion can and did contribute to notions of racial difference comes through in Hoberman’s treatment of colonial sport and how Europeans justified the subjugation of others by pointing to their inability to understand or emulate western sport-until they beat the masters at their own game, which forced a shift in the discourse of civilization. Thus, relations between the dominant and the dominated are complex and fluid. Remaining outside the mainstream has never been a viable option.

Borrowing from Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein’s *Bell Curve*, Hoberman sees the African American attachment to sport as creating a “clan pride” in which sport has been embraced as a foundation of black identity and has “diverted interest away from the life of the mind for most of this century” (p. 4). Hoberman provides no compelling evidence to support such an outrageous assertion. In fact, almost all of the keen observers of the African American experience point to education and religion as the driving forces in black life. But

amazingly, Hoberman turns black education into the source of the problem, beginning with the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington's "truncated Negro education" and its concern with the physical, which soon led black elites "to relinquish most of their doubts about the benefits of sports and focus instead on achieving athletic equality as one part of the educational enterprise" (p. 15). If that were not a serious enough misconstruction of the reality, Hoberman goes even farther, arguing that "the black athletes who today refine their athletic skills and little else at American universities are thus the damaged inheritors of an educational philosophy that once promoted manual training as the highest cultural achievement to which black youngsters should aspire" (p. 17). Hoberman, at a minimum, reveals an incredibly naive reading of Washington, who often said one thing and meant or did another, but who also saw manual training as foundational, a short-term strategy in a long-term movement toward equality, which included the classical training that Tuskegee always had. But to link the current "obsession" with sport directly to Washington's educational philosophy is patently absurd and utterly ahistorical. How does Hoberman reconcile his position with the motto of the indisputably elite United Negro College Fund: "The mind is a terrible thing to waste"?

Hoberman must know that he is obligated to establish a context in sport at least. Where were the great athletic programs in the country at the time that Hoberman sees this athletic turn among blacks? They were at Yale, Princeton, and Harvard, "The Big Three," where sport, especially football, developed and proved manhood, prepared the elites for the cutthroat world of business and government leadership, and allowed them to demonstrate their superiority over common folk. Moreover, what was the incredibly influential Theodore Roosevelt's position on strength of individual, group, and nation? By failing to ask such questions, Hoberman seems to be suggesting that blacks were offering a counternarrative to the dominant values of the time, when most astute observers would argue that the black middle class-whatever it is, and Hoberman never attempts to define it-engaged in a dangerously imitative discourse and adaptive strategy that reinscribed the racism its members hoped to counter. Unlike E. Franklin Frazier, who maintains that the middle class turned its back on the "folks," more recent scholarship suggests that black leadership tried too hard to impose dominant values on those it tried to "uplift."⁶

But, in the contemporary context, does Hoberman ask serious questions about the educational environments in which most blacks find themselves as a result of class stratification and residential segregation? No, he would rather find fault with the victims or at least members of the victims' own "clan." Lost in much of this indictment is Hoberman's weak concession to white racism as a causal element in the problems he finds; namely, that "blacks have been forced to seek respect and expanded opportunity through sport" (p. 4). It is a disclaimer that he repeats with equal de-emphasis a few pages later (p. 6).

If Hoberman's conclusions are problematic, so is his evidence. For a serious scholar, Hoberman relies on some of the shakiest of evidence, including unscientific interviews with men and women on the street and in his classroom.

Sometimes he even draws conclusions from nonverbal cues such as those of the “socially conscious black man,” whose “look of bitter amusement told me all I needed to know” (p. 5). It is an unintentionally humorous variation on, and ironic confirmation of, the theme of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. From such evidence and all that he sees, Hoberman concludes that “sport is quite simply more important to most black men, including the highly educated, than to their white counterparts” (p. 6).

Problems of evidence, tone, and analysis all come to a climax in a five-page stretch from pages 19 to 24, when Hoberman takes on the “damaged black psyche” and uses Ralph Ellison, among others, to establish a causal relationship “between family violence and the suffocation of intellectual curiosity” (p. 23). So-called African thrashing practices—seemingly more Islamic than African in that they were found in Northern Nigeria and referred to as “sheriya”—and whippings inflicted by, he argues, masters led to slave-administered corporal punishment, which in turn contributed to extremely brutal hazing practices of black Greek-letter organizations, including branding.⁷ In a past marked by brutality and harshness, Hoberman finds evidence of a powerfully physicalized sense of self, growing “out of the mandate to survive at any cost, and part of that cost has been the widely noted lack of intellectual ambition among young black males” (p. 24).

Error by commission is not the only problem with *Darwin’s Athletes*, for its omissions are just as serious. Hoberman, like other scholars, must be selective in the use of information. Yet the reasons for selectivity can determine the creditability of a work as a reasonably balanced contribution to the search for “truth.” Unfortunately, Hoberman’s selectivity appears to be employed in the service of advancing his point of view without accommodation or consideration of competing or conflicting evidence. The chapter on black intellectuals, “Writin’ is Fightin’,” epitomizes his extreme selectivity. His narrow definition of intellectuals, which includes only those “who have established public profiles outside of academia,” excludes, or relegates to footnotes, those black scholars of sport who have been critical of athletics, including the overinvestment of blacks in sport. Among such scholars are Othello Harris, Donald Spivey, Kenneth Shropshire, Earl Smith, and myself. He completely neglects the views of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., arguably the leading black intellectual as Hoberman defines the term, who in one page of *Sports Illustrated* does all of that which Hoberman maintains no black intellectual has ever done. Moreover, Gates, unlike Hoberman, tries to offer solutions while carefully assessing and distributing responsibility.⁸ (Hoberman actually criticizes Gates for endorsing Michael Dyson’s *Reflecting Black*, which contains one essay on Michael Jordan that Hoberman finds overly valorizing.) Equally astonishing is how Hoberman virtually ignores the strong and sustained views of Arthur Ashe on the subject of academics and athletics. Nowhere does Hoberman discuss the loud and contentious debates among blacks about the NCAA’s elevation of academic standards, which Ashe championed.

Where Hoberman does not select, he distorts. The chapter title “Writin’ is Fightin’” comes from a work by Ishmael Reed, and Hoberman finds in it a dangerous athleticization of the mind through the characterization of writing as

a physical act. Hoberman also condemns Reed for identifying with former heavyweight boxing champion Larry Holmes. All of this criticism seems totally unwarranted and in complete disregard of literary metaphor and license. Must writers only be geeks? Equally troubling is his critique of black people's characterizations of Johnnie Cochran as a Joe Louis in the courtroom. Here too Hoberman finds evidence of the physicalization of the intellect and a glorification of the athletic hero. I wonder how many white attorneys have been described as prizefighters. It seems to me that the courtroom readily lends itself to such analogies, considering the adversarial nature of the American system of justice, which features one-on-one confrontations requiring quick thinking on the feet, not unlike counterpunching. But there is also something strange about Hoberman's refusal to consider black intellectuals' opinions about black creativity in sport and music and its connection to complex functions of the mind. For someone who condemns the mind/body dichotomy and the laws of compensation, Hoberman's unwillingness to even consider athletic excellence as a form of genius seems odd but is the only way he can make his point about the alleged damaging consequences of physical overdevelopment.

But even more astounding is how Hoberman takes thirty-year-old quotes from Amiri Baraka when he was still LeRoi Jones, and Eldrige Cleaver when he was still a revolutionary and not a right-wing fundamentalist, and presents them as additional evidence of the alleged, current physicalization of the black intellectual. Hoberman uses both men's words without the least bit of contextualization within the Black Power movement and the inflammatory masculinist rhetoric that characterized it. Hoberman goes on to cite a particular quote by Baraka as a "denigration of literature" and "an act of emotional blackmail" in which he "virtually dares the black intelligentsia to choose between pugilism and art, between the authority of the body, and that of the mind, between masculinity and effeminacy, implying all the while that only music and sports fall within the magic circle of authentically black self-expression" (p. 82). If that were not damning enough, Hoberman asks: "Yet how many young intellectuals have been held hostage to the blackmailing tactics of Baraka and the racial chauvinists who have followed in his wake?" (p. 83).

Although I am not as equipped to comment expertly on many of the issues that Hoberman treats in the last two-thirds of the book, I do believe that Hoberman's views toward science are somewhat confused and ambivalent. The problem seems to rest with his inability or unwillingness to disregard or deny race as biologically significant in addition to his privileging of science as a mode of inquiry above all others. The crux of Hoberman's dilemma is captured in the following passage:

A critique of the search for racial athletic aptitude can be legitimized on both scientific and humanitarian grounds. It is easy enough to show that a great deal of naive speculation about purported racial differences has appeared in scientific and medical journals; indeed, many examples of such biased thinking are presented in this book. We can also point to the malign role that racial science has often played over the past two centuries.

Yet it is also the case that these arguments can take the form of a disingenuous (and unscientific) opposition to the investigation of racial differences per se on the grounds that they are either too trivial or too potentially dangerous to examine. (pp. 144-145)

Hoberman urges us to follow the leads wherever they may go and, as proof of his contention, points to what I believe are some rather suspect links between disease and “race,” suggesting that environment alone cannot explain the apparent connections. To his credit, he cites examples in which medical assumptions about racial difference have proved wrong and dangerous, especially with regard to heart disease. Yet of more concern to him is that refusal to engage the subject of race and biology will leave the field open for white extremists like J. Phillippe Rushton, Michael Levin, Vincent Sarich, and the late Richard Herrnstein, among others, on the one side and the black eugenicists and melaninists on the other side.

Although there is much to appreciate in Hoberman’s treatment of racist science, there is a very troubling subtext, in which he sets up fall guys in his attempt to position himself along with “good” science on the side of the heroes. It seems to me that much more must be known about those who are not at the extremes, whose findings in scientific journals contribute to the “racial folklore” that Hoberman finds everywhere.

I fear that I have failed to do justice to Hoberman’s work for a whole book, perhaps books, are required to respond adequately. Moreover, no one individual can address seriously the many issues that Hoberman treats. Despite the urge that many feel to dismiss Hoberman’s work, both its provocative content and public attention make ignoring it a counterproductive option. Thus, I am in the process of organizing a symposium of black intellectuals, broadly defined, to respond to *Darwin’s Athletes*. If nothing else, I am thankful to Hoberman for supplying the impetus, occasion, and organizing principle for an event that I suggested in slightly different form in my essay on “race” and sport in the fall 1994 issue of this journal. The symposium will take place at New York University in early April 1998.

In closing, I would like to offer an example that demonstrates the complexities of the issue in question in ways that *Darwin’s Athletes* misses. I have long advocated for the abolition of boxing and wrote in a 1989 article urging physicians to support a ban:

The physicians who argue that boxing keeps young men off the street, out of crime, and away from drugs—a questionable argument at best—are not praising a sport but signaling a dismal failure of the American Dream for many. For there is little difference between what boxing supposedly helps them to avoid and the tragic option the sport represents.

But many times I have had to ask myself: Do I wish that Muhammad Ali had never existed? Of course not. I might wish that he did not have to be a boxer to gain the kind of attention and take on the kind of symbolism that he did, but that would be to wish for an entirely different America. Moreover, without

Muhammad Ali I would not be writing this piece, for it is because of his inspiration that I chose to become a scholar of sport. Even more, sport made me read. With few visible models of success, Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Althea Gibson, and others stood out as beacons in the night. They were a far cry from the Step'n Fechts and Rochesters who were paraded before us as reminders of our real station and alleged character. Those outstanding individuals were embraced by me and my family not as athletes but as the personification of possibility. I doubt that we were alone in this respect, but *Darwin's Athletes* cannot provide the answer, for it is more interested in telling than in asking.

1. DuBois's review of Robert A. Warner, *New Haven Negroes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940) in *American Historical Review* XLVII (January 1942): 376-377, as cited in *W.E.B. DuBois: A Profile*, ed., Rayford Logan (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971), p. 256 f.n.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
3. Adolph Reed, "Steele Trap," *The Nation*, March 4, 1991, p. 274; Patricia Williams, *New York Times*, September 16, 1990, S. 7, p. 12.
4. Orlando Patterson, *New York Times*, October 20, 1991, S. 4, p. 15.
5. Eric Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1 (1973): 12, 16, as cited in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 18.
6. Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
7. Hoberman relies on Bertram Wyatt Brown for his evidence about African practices. Brown is a historian of the American South, with no training, as far as I know, in African history. Moreover, one place in Northern Nigeria is not Africa. Although I find little to defend in the activities of black fraternities, or white ones for that matter, I do think that they deserve far more serious treatment than Hoberman gives. Evidence from an informant or two is simply unacceptable for the conclusions he draws on such a sensitive subject.
8. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Delusions of Grandeur," *Sports Illustrated*, August 19, 1991, p. 78.
9. Jeffrey T. Sammons, "Why Physicians Should Oppose Boxing: An Interdisciplinary History Perspective," *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (March 10, 1989) Vol. 261, no. 10, p. 1486.