ROBERTS, RANDY, *"But They Can't Beat Us": Oscar Robertson and the Crispus Attucks Tigers.* Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1999. Pp. 219. Illustrated. Notes, bibliographical essay, index. $19.95 cb.

There remains one relatively sure way to instigate a debate, or perhaps an argument, in the state of Indiana. Travel to a diner, it does not matter much where the diner is located, and ask of the patrons assembled there, "So, who is the best basketball player this state ever produced?" The answer you receive may depend on what region of the state you are in or the average age of the diners. In the southern portion of the Hoosier state someone is bound to offer Larry Bird, Damon Bailey, or maybe Bobby Plump, the artist behind the Milan Miracle fictionalized in the movie, *Hoosiers.* Should the diner be in the northern or central part of the state someone might offer Rick Mount, Kyle Macy, or George McGinnis. There are a lot of guys and increasingly a few women to choose from in answering the question, but if the diner is in Indianapolis one name will be heard first, Oscar. The Big O. Oscar Robertson.

Randy Roberts weighs in on the eternal debate with his book, *"But They Can't Beat Us."* The title was taken from the Crispus Attucks Tigers "Crazy Song." Students and adult spectators would sing the Crazy Song when their team had the game safely in hand. The song was a melodic version of the Red Auerbach cigar. Roberts leaves little doubt that Oscar Robertson was the best schoolboy basketball player Indiana produced, and that the Crispus Attucks Tigers were perhaps the state's best team. It is difficult to separate the two entities, Robertson and the school, because Roberts wrote of Crispus Attucks' two-year reign of supremacy (1955-56) when they won two state titles and lost only one game almost as much as he wrote of Oscar Robertson. That is probably as it should be, because Robertson was the quintessential team player and the Tigers would not be as well remembered had not Oscar plied his craft while wearing the Attucks jersey. In these days when adolescent sports stars pen autobiographies, or have someone do it for them, it is surprising and disappointing that no biography of Oscar Robertson exists a quarter century after his retirement from the National Basketball Association.

Roberts reached for a higher goal than the worthy exercise of chronicling an individual. His goal was to write a story of "discrimination and accomplishment, of power and powerlessness.... of Indiana and of basketball" (viii). Roberts occasionally reaches his lofty goals. Crispus Attucks High School opened in 1927 as the designated school for African Americans in Indianapolis. African Americans (and no few whites) hotly contested its creation, but were defeated by a population determined to limit the interaction between the races in Indianapolis's public schools. Attucks became an institution that was home to much of the race relation debate among the African American community while simultaneously being a point of pride exported to the community at-large. The complicated story of Attucks's position in Indianapolis is largely missing from the book. Perhaps because of a failure to investigate more fully the bibliography on African Americans in Indianapolis, Roberts missed the opportunity to make the Attucks experience a real case study of sports and racial attitudes in the urban context. Roberts made much of the race of the Attucks

players, but failed to discuss to any significant degree the inclusion of African American players on white teams in Indianapolis schools after Attucks began its basketball success. And, given that Indiana state law prohibited segregated schools after 1949, one can certainly question whether basketball competitiveness trumped race theory. If the Attucks basketball success demonstrated black superiority in the sport, then why were school desegregation efforts stalled—thereby guaranteeing Attucks a racial advantage? Clearly these questions are beyond the bound of any biography on Oscar Robertson, but they are relevant to any sophisticated treatment of Crispus Attucks and Indianapolis.

Despite the limitations of the book in regards to the history of Indianapolis and of race relations, Roberts excels in descriptions of games and sports theory. As in other books that Roberts has written, *But They Can't Beat Us* flows seamlessly and as fluidly as the Attucks fast break that he describes. Roberts emphasizes the style of play employed by Attucks. He argued that Attucks's game "came from the soul of America's urban ghettos, from places like the Dust Bowl (a playground in downtown Indianapolis), where black youths played their city game" (162-63), a game where fast break basketball was key to victory. But later Roberts admitted that fast break basketball was not the sole province of African Americans. Branch McCracken, head basketball coach at Indiana University employed the "McCracken system," a scheme that emphasized a similar fast break style (169). If the styles were indeed similar, then Attucks style of play was not all that radical.

Moreover, discussions about basketball style and race are open to much debate and quickly devolve into examinations of ability based on race. How does the ethos of the urban ghetto get represented on a basketball court? How exactly did black teams defend differently than did white teams, or are discussions of style limited only to offensive basketball? Was style a byproduct of a segregated system that forced black schools to play each other irrespective of the usual confines of geography and expense? Black schools, after all, had a national championship that brought teams together from all over the country. Students of sport, both theoretical and practical, have wrestled with these questions for some time. While they will enjoy a good read in *But They Can't Beat Us,* many questions will remain about race, sport, and community.

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