

Sport Heroes and Bad Winners in North America

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A sequel to prior research on sports heroes and heroines in America, this project was designed to overcome a criticism-conclusions based on a small, regional sample-of my earlier work. Especially significant for its large, international sample, the study was designed to 1) determine whether Americans have sports heroes; 2) identify those athletes most admired (heroes) and those least admired (bad winners); 3) ascertain the characteristics attributed to those heroes and bad winners named; and 4) determine any sex, race, or regional differences in the choices of heroes and bad winners named and in the characteristics attributed to those identified. Packets of specially prepared questionnaires were mailed to faculty members at colleges throughout the United States and Canada who administered the inventories to students on their respective campuses. Faculty confederates from each of the nine geographical areas identified in **The Nine Nations of North America** returned a minimum of 200 responses per area (N = 2500). However, the results discussed were based on preliminary analyses of 700 responses; seven of the nine areas are represented. Respondents identified their favorite sports performers, listing the qualities most admired about them and then identified one or more sports performers not liked, listing those attributes not admired. The specific qualities mentioned were then organized into twelve categories: ability, appearance, competitiveness, favorite, sportsmanship, individualism, self-confidence, public image, personality, intelligence, leadership, prejudice, tells-it-like-is, and miscellaneous. Results support earlier findings that both men and women select males as heroes and bad winners and that blacks chose back heroes and whites chose white heroes. Overall, Julius Erving was the most popular athlete (Spring, 1984). Heroes are admired for their athletic ability and competitiveness - hard work and hustle - while bad winners are criticized for arrogance. John McEnroe and Muhammad Ali head the list of bad winners. Although the contrasts between blacks and whites in the qualities admired are not as great as those reported earlier, the differences are in the same direction. Specifically, while ability is the most important quality of heroes, it is especially characteristic of black athletes; both blacks and whites are more likely to mention the ability of black athletes than of white athletes. Conversely, competitiveness is appreciated more in white athletes, by both black and whites. On the other hand, intelligence is used by both blacks and whites to describe black heroes. Public Image (style) is a quality that blacks

admire in other blacks while whites are more likely to mention sportsmanship as a positive quality. Blacks and whites admire all other qualities equally.

Differences in the characteristics admired by blacks and whites were compared with clashes of culture in dress, language, the classroom, and in sports as outlined by Kochman in **Black and White Styles in Conflict**, with the contrast between the city (black) and country (white) styles of play in basketball, and the increase in taunting and flaunting behavior in organized sport. Finally, the accuracy of the results were evaluated in terms of the gate keeping effect of the electronic media on the public images of athletes, the possible homogenization of a sample of college students, and the precision of the categories of qualities used to ascertain cultural differences between blacks and whites.