

The Black Athletic Hero and the “American Dilemma”

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In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal published a detailed analysis of race relations in the United States entitled *The American Dilemma*. The title of his study captured the essence of one of the great contradictions in America's commitment to the ideals of democracy. In a political culture devoted to liberty and equality, American blacks had been virtually denied the ability to experience these precious values at the time of Myrdal's research. The athletic color line, in one sense, was merely a reflection of the larger society's willingness to live with the contradiction between democratic values and racial segregation. But the relationship between sport and racism was more complex because the ethic of athletics strongly suggested that the athletic arena provided a laboratory for achieving democratic goals which somehow eluded other institutions in American society. Consequently, when athletic teams denied opportunities to black athletes or singled them out for special harassment, they violated their own codes, as well as society's ideals.

In sport, just as in society, individual blacks broke through racial barriers to challenge racist myths that prevailed in American society. The careers of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali are particularly useful in examining the experience of the black athletic hero and his relationship to American society. My paper does not dig up new information about these athletes. Instead, my essay relies on the extant secondary literature and suggests some conclusions about the mixture of race, sport, and society. In particular, I argue that, despite the limitations of sport described by commentators like Professor Harry Edwards, historical evidence leads to the conclusion that black athletic heroes have played a significant, if imperfect, role in promoting civil rights in the United States. Of course, as I hope to explain in the body of my paper, black athletic heroes made different kinds of contributions to the civil rights movement. The various ways that black heroism manifested itself were, at a minimum, a function of personality, the culture of their sport, and their historical setting. An underlying theme of my essay is that one way to understand and to teach about sport and race is by analyzing the place of the black athletic hero in our society.



Bill Beezley had some difficulty getting up for the Business Meeting