

# Understanding the Black Sport Experience: Questions, Interpretations, and Approaches

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This paper reviews the published material pertaining to the history of black athletes in American sport and concludes with recommendations for further studies. While research dealing with the history of the black athlete appear with regularity in the leading journals, anthologies, and surveys on American sport, this paper argues that scholars have failed to fully grasp the meaning of sport in the black community and as a result need to explore different topics in more detail and from various methodological perspectives. One of the many suggestions put forward in the paper is that scholars interested in the history of the black athlete would profit by utilizing the concept of “psychic duality” or “double-consciousness” espoused by W.E.B. Dubois some eighty years ago. Dubois, the well known black intellectual from Harvard, wrote in his classic 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk* that blacks in this country have always felt a sense of being- “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strengths alone keeps it from being tom asunder.” This double-consciousness of being black and being American, which Dubois so eloquently pointed out, came into focus for black athletes involved in American sport between 1865 and 1968. Outstanding black athletes as diverse personally as Isaac Murphy and Muhammad Ali continually strove to be full participants in American sport while at the same time maintaining their distinctive ethnic identity. Notwithstanding individual differences in mores and value schemes, a number of black athletes, in other words, desired access into the American sport establishment without fear of sacrificing a dimension of their cultural or racial pride. This dual quest was not a matter of assimilation. Black athletes simply wanted to say that equality, freedom of opportunity, and other promises of American life were as much theirs as other citizens. They deserved the same chance as anybody else to gain prestige, recognition, and a sense of cultural identity through active participation in American sport.