

The Black Actor as Athlete and Mover: An Historical Analysis of Stereotypes, Distortions and Bravura Performances in American Action Films

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The paper sets out to apply the Donald Bogle paradigm to the study of the history of the black actor as athlete in the widest possible sense of that word “athlete.” The review of films included a number of traditional acting performances in the standard American sports film. For example, Jackie Robinson, playing himself in *The Jackie Robinson Story* and Carl Weathers (in the role of Apollo Creed), Rocky I-IV. On a different plane and at a different level, Paul Robeson’s impassioned energy in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, and James Earl Jones as Jack Johnson in *The Great White Hope*, and more recently, as the iconoclastic writer of the 1960s liberated by Kevin Costner’s fantastic baseball diamond in *Field of Dreams*.

Bogle’s 1989 study, *Toms, Coons, Mullattoes, Mammies and Bucks* is an interpretive history of blacks in American films. Bogle makes the point that American film in general is predominantly peopled by stereotypes and distortions. He sees historically a situation in which black actors instead of “playing characters, have had to play against their roles.” While Bogle does examine Mr. Bojangles, the father of tap dancing, and Jim Brown, his “Jock as Movie Star” section is only a two page review of contemporary black sport films. It is true that the majority of the films that have starred black athletes (for example, O.J. Simpson, Rosey Grier, Rafer Johnson, Fred Williamson, Woody Strode), have neither provided critical substance nor professional advancement in acting roles much more muscular than cerebral. The greatest running back of all time, Jim Brown, was a professional killer in the *Dirty Dozen* and two decades later, he had the same characterization, albeit no longer a senior starring role, as the stalker “Fireball” in *The Running Man*. However, there have been a handful of memorable black “actor as athlete” roles. Arguably, Louis Gossett Jr.’s Oscar winning role as the drill instructor in *An Officer and a Gentleman* and Richard Pryor’s performance as Wendell Scott, the first black stock car champion, in *Greased Lightning*. The contribution of Denzel Washington (a baseball playing military man in *A Soldier’s Story*) was noted and his 1990 Oscar winning role as the escaped slave Trip, in *Glory*, was highlighted. It is concluded that in American culture at large there is a plethora of negative racial stereotypes. Recommendations were made regarding possible future movie projects. Does not Jesse Owens deserve the sort of treatment meted out to Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire*? Why have there been no, or worse still, mediocre films about Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Sugar Ray Robinson, the Harlem Globetrotters, Muhammad Ali, Walter Payton, Jim Brown, Althea Gibson, Debbie Thomas and Flo Hyman? The roots of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) were steeped in, and blinkered by a white American culture orientation which down-played the status, values and credibility of blacks. Stereotypes, distortions and caricatures have historically plagued and permeated the moving and the still picture.