

# Cinderellas of Sport: Black Women and the Politics of Race and Gender in Track and Field

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Women's track and field athletics, along with other sports like swimming, tennis, and basketball, excited enormous public interest and controversy in the 1920s. Like basketball, track's controversial popularity prompted negative media coverage and organized efforts to eliminate the sport from school and international competition. However, while basketball and other games survived as popular women's sports, track did not. It remained culturally defined as inherently masculine and thus inappropriate for women. Consequently most women did not participate at all. Those who did endured caricatures as amazons, muscle molls, and even hermaphrodites.

As track emerged as a for-men-only sport, it simultaneously gained a reputation as a "black sport." With the success of African-American men sprinters in the 1920s and Jesse Owens' 1936 Berlin Olympic victories over Hitler's Aryan wonderboys, black track stars attained a symbolic significance beyond their individual achievements. Because black communities supported the sport in schools, playgrounds, and athletic clubs, African-American women found track and field more attractive and more accessible than other sports. Stepping into an arena vacated by middle-class white women, black women blazed a remarkable trail of national and international excellence.

In examining black women's emergence as leaders of track and field, this paper analyzes the impact of racial ideologies on the gender politics of women's sport. Black women's preeminent position in the sport had a double edge. While their success spoke to the reality of African-American cultural achievements, in racist eyes it also confirmed oppressive stereotypes of black women as animalistic, sexually deviant and unattractive. Grafted onto corresponding images of the mannish female athlete, the figure of the black woman track athlete fused gender and racial stereotypes. When the exigencies of Cold War politics prompted 1950s sport promoters to forsake their policy of neglect for active efforts to revive the sport, they saw the problem as one of sex alone. In fact, it was equally one of race and of the interconnections of gender and race. The confluence of racist and sexist ideologies in women's track and field perpetuated the exclusion of black women from dominant ideals of womanhood, at the same time acting as a constraint upon the freedom of all women to engage in sport.