

**Color commentary: An Analysis of the
Presentation of African-American Athletes in
the First Twenty years of Sports Illustrated,
1954-1974**

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This paper examines the presentation of African-American athletes during the first twenty years of the publication of Sports Illustrated, with the first issue appearing

in August 1954, the magazine set out to establish itself as the nation's most widely read sporting weekly. Articles covered the more popular sports of football, baseball, and basketball, but set out to attract the interests of others, such as hunting, travelling, and nature guides. Inevitably as the nation underwent the turmoils of the integration process, so, too, did the sporting arena. This paper examines how the sporting magazine chronicled race relations in the sporting world during this time period and offers an interesting insight into the athletes, and into the messages that were presented and how they were interpreted. Moreover, it addresses how these athletes were portrayed by the popular press and in turn how they were perceived and interpreted by the sporting public as well and the general public of the country.

Willie Mays was the first African-American athlete to appear on the magazine's cover on April 11, 1955, when he, Leo Durocher, and Lorraine Day appeared on the baseball preview issue's cover. The first African-American athlete to grace the cover alone was Don Newcombe later that August. Althea Gibson was the first female African-American athlete to be showcased on the cover in September 1957. In the late 1950s articles began to appear that highlighted not so much the apparent athletic ability of great Black athletes, such as Jim Brown, Bill Russell, and Wilt Chamberlain, but their attitudes and ideas about race issues in the nation. Sports Illustrated presented several Black athletes in a more favorable light, claiming Willie Mays and Floyd Patterson as two such characters, and at the same time established and supported a darker image of athletes like Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali, and Russell. Additionally, the magazine attempted to remain neutral in the reporting of specific incidents, such as the 1964 incident in which the black players on the San Diego Chargers were asked to leave the pool room of a hotel reportedly owned by the Charger owner, the segregation policies of local pools and little leagues, and other lesser known incidents. The editors also recognized the growing ability and the legitimate concerns expressed by Black athletes in the 1960s when they published a special issue in 1968 which addressed the Black athlete and issues surrounding Black involvement in sport. Still, while some writers on staff would recognize Muhammad Ali's name change after his victory over Sonny Liston, the Scorecard section and other staff members would still call him Cassius Clay, refusing to recognize his name change. After his victory over Liston, Ali was mentioned in over ten consecutive issues, with the majority of the articles or commentaries not focusing on his athletic talents, but his loud-mouth and brash talking.

Several themes emerge in the writings over the twenty year period. The integration of college and professional teams and facilities, the dominance of Black athletes in the boxing ring, and the Black athlete as either angry warrior or content ballplayer are three themes that dominate the writings. Equally important is the shift in coverage and terminology utilized by Sports Illustrated staff writers in the writings and coverage of both Black athletes and the events in which they participated.