

Edwin Bancroft Henderson: Educator, Civil Rights Activist, and Chronicler of African-American Athletes

David K. Wiggins
George Mason University, VA

Charles Drew, who attended Washington, D.C.'s prestigious M Street High School, later starred in several sports at Amherst College, and eventually became a famous hematologist and blood bank pioneer noted in a 1945 letter that he personally felt "a very great debt of gratitude to Edwin Bancroft Henderson." "I owe you and a few other men like you," Drew noted, "for setting most of the standards that I have felt were worthwhile, the things I have lived by and for and whenever possible have attempted to pass on." Drew's comments, which came nearly ten years prior to his death in a tragic automobile accident, stemmed from a deep admiration for Henderson. Like so many others, Drew had great respect for Henderson's commitment to education, valiant struggles against racial discrimination, and promotion of sport and physical activity among African-Americans.

This study examines, through canvassing personal letters, newspaper accounts, institutional records, and a host of other primary sources, Henderson's career which spanned the fifty year period between the 1904 publication of W.E.B. Dubois' famous "Credo," and the Supreme Court's Landmark 1954 desegregation case of Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka. What is immediately apparent from this analysis is that Henderson was an extraordinarily talented physical educator, coach, athletic administrator, civil rights activist, and sport historian who made lasting contributions to his community and society at large. He was responsible, among other things, for introducing basketball to African American children in Washington, D.C. and organizing the Public School Athletic League in that city's segregated school system. He co-founded the Washington D.C. Pigsaw Club and established such organizations as the Inter-Scholastic Athletic Association of Middle Atlantic States, Eastern Board of Officials, Washington, D.C. Chapter of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD), Colored Citizens Protection League of Falls Church, Virginia, and the Fall Church, Virginia Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was a member and frequent office-holder in a number of other professional organizations, including the Committee for Coordinating Recreational Plans in the District of Columbia, NAACP Committee on Recreation, Joint Army and Navy Committee on Recreation, National Council on Physical Fitness of the Federal Security Agency, Health and Recreation Committees of the Council of Social Agencies, AAHPERD Facilities Committee, and the District of Columbia's 12th Street Bank of the Young Men's Christian Association.

Henderson also fought throughout his life, both individually and in affiliation with many of the aforementioned organizations, against various forms of racial discrimination. He waged war against Jim Crow transportation facilities in Virginia, led campaigns to eliminate segregated recreational and organized sports programs in Washington, D.C., and fought to prohibit southern states from excluding African Americans from membership in local AAHPERD chapters. Henderson was, moreover, a prolific writer. He penned literally thousands of "Letters to the Editor" on various topics to newspapers across the country and published numerous articles in such journals *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, *The Negro History Bulletin*, *Journal of Negro Education*, *Journal of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation*, and *Opportunity*. He wrote several book chapters and co-edited the frequently cited *Official Handbook: Interscholastic Athletic Association of Middle Atlantic States*. Perhaps most important, Henderson wrote the first book, *The Negro in Sports*, on the history of African Americans in sport. The book, which went through two editions, is still a standard reference work for scholars interested in the subject.

Henderson's achievements did not go unrecognized. Although many of his accomplishments took place behind segregated walls, and were confined to the Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia areas, Henderson was honored by organizations representing all races and professional interests. He was given the YMCA Distinguished Service Award, received a Presidential Citation and Honor Award from AAHPERD, selected as a Howard University Alumnus of the Year, appointed Honorary President of the North American Society for Sport History, and elected as a Charter Member of the Black Athletes Hall of Fame.