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Invisible Woman: African American Female Athletes and Sport During the 1960s

Research focussing on the athletic participation of African American male athletes has increased greatly over the last decade. Much of this work has been historical and lends a necessary perspective and foundation for the study of contemporary African American sport experience and related issues. Despite the increased attention given to African American sport, one area still requiring historians' attention is the sporting experience of the female African American athlete. Certainly, there have been several dissertations and other works on this topic, but it has not been given anywhere near the same attention as studies of male athletes. Commonly, volumes analyzing the sporting experiences of African American athletes include short chapters on Black women, list names, sports, and dates, but offer little else.

The participation of African American women in sport during the 1960s has been documented, with much of the focus on the Olympic feats of Wilma Rudolph and her track and field teammates. While African American women were involved in many sports, track and field was a sport with large numbers of participants who enjoyed much success. Historian Susan Cahn attributes much of this to the marginalization of the sport which was a result of the perceived masculinity of it and those who participated in it. If track and field was not a legitimate enough sport for white women, it did welcome Black women. Ironically, the success of Black female track and field athletes was critical to the rise in popularity and success that the sport enjoyed nationally.

This paper analyzes the sporting experiences of Black female athletes during the 1960s from a framework of cultural protest in the era of civil rights. While African American male athletes became increasingly more visible in protests involving sport—the Olympic Boycott committee, college football players, track and field athletes, and Muhammad Ali—female athletes were relatively invisible in such incidents.

During the civil rights movement in this period, Black women were relegated to secondary positions and it is reasonable to assume that the same hierarchy existed within sport. I attempt here to understand African American women's sport participation within

the context of a culture that discriminated against them on the basis not only of their race, but also their gender, and suggest that their participation in sport can be interpreted as a form of cultural protest and resistance.



Bob Barnett helps Dave Zang's demo.