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American Ideas about Race and Olympic Races, 1896-1940: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Scientific Racism?

At the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Jesse Owens won four gold medals. For American civilization, his feats represented more than just an exceptional athletic performance, his triumphs provided data that some Americans interpreted as shattering Nazi myths of Aryan racial superiority. Some believed the data would hasten the integration of American society, others even hoped they signaled the beginning of the end of American racism. Others interpreted them as proof that the United States actually enjoyed practical racial equality—contrary to social relations. Several insightful thinkers pointed out that while Owens’ runs and jumps supposedly annihilated Nazi racial ideology, they had little impact on American visions of white supremacist philosophy.

And some observers explained Owens’ victories through the entrenched racist paradigms of the 1930s. Allegedly less evolved than European-Americans—and thus closer to ‘nature’—African-Americans were supposed to be better in ‘unthinking’ physical competitions than ‘brighter’ whites. Acceptance of the myth of black physical superiority in the dominant white culture of the United States reinforced traditional patterns of racism.

Statistics from Olympic performances expanded dialogues in the United States about national prowess and its relation to race. If sport was a “magic touchstone” for understanding the nature of a civilization then the victories by Owens and other “black auxiliaries” (as the international press corps dubbed African-American Olympians) created data which meant something important to American civilization—a civilization in which race was crucial to national self-definition. In the United States, a nation peopled by every European region, as well as peoples from African, Asian and Native American civilizations, the idea of race created critical problems. Which nationalities and ethnicities belonged to an “American race”? Could anyone in the United States join the American race regardless of national origin or skin color, as some champions of the “melting pot” proclaimed? Was the American race culturally determined? Or was race a natural

phenomenon? Did it represent an irreducible genetic category? Were some racial groups better in certain arenas of human endeavor, on IQ tests or in one-hundred-meter dashes? If race mattered, and it did absolutely, how did it matter?

John Hoberman's recent *Darwin's Athletes* (1997) raised important issues about the connections between science, sport, and race. This paper attempts to explore those issues as part of the history of the first fifty years of the modern Olympic Games.