

Rick Knott
Bethel College

***Confronting the Meaning of Sport Myth
in American Culture:
Opening a Critical Dialogue***

Throughout modern times, historians have studied myth in the liberal tradition, handling it as objectively as possible, while attempting to liberate the mind from such bondage. Mythology is often treated as something related to long lost civilizations, as no longer a part of modern civilization. As historians begin to contemplate modern mythologies, they come to grips with some of the driving forces that shape and re-shape our culture. This paper examines the historic development of one common cultural myth, the myth of the self-made man. For the purpose of opening a critical dialogue, the paper attempts to demonstrate how attribution theories borrowed from the discipline of psychology can be used to explain social myth. Finally, the paper examines the challenge

posed to one's attribution paradigm when encountering a competing paradigm, in this case, the myth of the black athlete.

Attribution theories share some basic assumptions: that we seek to make sense of our world, and that we attribute people's actions to external or internal causes, and that we do so in logical and consistent ways. Western culture has a fairly long tradition of attributing people's actions to internal causes. There are examples in the heroes Americans have chosen. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the democratic way of life was new and needed heroes who embraced democratic ideals. Frontier heroes such as Boone and Crockett found immediate acceptance in this role. They appeared to be self-made men and thus embodied the democratic ideal. As the frontier closed, the sport hero helped to fill the void vacated by the frontier hero and for over 150 years there have been sufficient rags to riches stories to perpetuate the myth of sport as a vehicle of upward social and economic mobility. One's belief in the democratic ideal of open accessibility to wealth and privilege is embodied in such self-made men as Michael Jordan.

Heroes are chosen to affirm our attribution paradigms. The myth of the self-made man is deeply rooted in the American social fabric. Ironically, the myth of the black athlete has forced the dominant culture to break from its traditional internal attribution paradigm and search for a new external attribution paradigm. As African Americans increasingly dominate numerous sport strata, the myth of the self-made man comes into conflict with perhaps an older and more deeply rooted attribution paradigm, the myth of European superiority. The dominant culture attempts to maintain as much of the older myth as possible, but also seeks out a new paradigm, all in an effort to maintain its hegemony. So, one rarely hears Michael Jordan discussed with the traditional self-made jargon used to describe John L. Sullivan or Babe Ruth. The dominant culture turns instead to the social scientist who argues that the black athlete's success is due to his or her environment. The natural scientist argues that the success of the black athlete is due to genetic endowment. Both positions break with Western tradition and turn to an external attribution paradigm.

The sport myth serves to classify and attribute effects to causes that ultimately help us interpret our world without forcing us to challenge or confront our own prejudice. Instead, we simply change the myth as well as our attribution paradigms in the wake of new evidence. Attribution theories as well as our sporting myths are marked by fluidity and are ultimately defined and shaped by the dominant culture, often at the expense of marginalized groups.