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Re-Theorizing Race:
Some Preliminary Observations on the
Implications for Sport History

In general, sport history has been slow to embrace post-structuralist conceptualizations of 'race.' As Catriona Parratt noted in a 1998 article, works such as Patricia Vertinsky's *The Eternally Wounded Woman* and Susan Cahn's *Coming on Strong* have incorporated "turns" toward (are-theorizing of) gender and culture, while remaining

grounded in the social-material world. However, in most examinations of ‘race’ and sport, the former remains a biologized, transhistorical given, rather than an unstable sign with shifting meaning. Although feminist sport scholars have demonstrated the relevance of theorizing gender in examining the social construction, allocation, maintenance and hierarchy of gender roles, a similar re-theorizing of race that encompasses its role as a governing and organizational code—within and outside of the institution of sport—has yet to occur.

Just as Parratt cautions against allowing the turn toward gender to become a “turning away” from the women that sport history traditionally marginalizes, for example, women of color and working class women, scholars worry that theoretical articulations of race will obscure the ‘real,’ lived experiences of Blacks in sport. But a post-structuralist turn toward race can include a concern with the ‘effects’ of race in the ‘real’ world. In addition, re-conceptualization of race can make visible those erased by a dichotomized, essentialized vision of race. For instance, within American sport history, race has generally meant Black and White, with little consideration as to how certain groups become Black or White. Furthermore, the White sporting experience is situated as the norm while Black sport history is placed on the margins or as an adjunct to the mainstream, and thus ghettoized. Re-theorizing race permits a re-positioning of Blacks at the center of their own sport history, rather than as a problem or fragment of the main. In addition, re-theorizing race allows for the recovery/discovery of Black middle-class and female voices that are frequently rendered mute by focus on the Black male lower-class experience.

In a 1994 article, Jeffrey T. Sammons argues that any meaningful analysis of race and sport must examine the construction of ‘whiteness’ as a race, not just blackness. Despite this exhortation, sport historians of race in sport generally fall into the trap of essentializing race. Even the groundbreaking sociologist of sport, Harry Edwards, who acknowledges the influence of cultural forces on the conceptualizations of White and Black, ultimately accepts the fixed notions of Black and White and places them in a false binary and fixed oppositional relationship. Meanwhile, David K. Wiggins’ primary contention is that Black dominance in certain sports is best explained through historical analysis of social structures, yet he maintains that we should not completely discount ‘scientific’ explanations for Black athletic prowess. John Hoberman’s recent work, *Darwin’s Athletes* declares that sport has damaged Black America and preserved the myth of race. Despite labeling race a myth, Hoberman reifies what Sammons calls the “common meaning” of race by assuming the existence of two racial categories, Black and White. Like Wiggins, Hoberman intimates that the explanation for superior Black athleticism might one day be explained at the molecular level. However, if, according to Jacques Barzun, Anthony Appiah and Howard Winant, race falls apart at the level of language, how can we use a biologized conception of race to explain a social phenomenon such as the disproportionate representation of Blacks in sport?

Sport seems ripe for a re-theorization of race and the work of Michel Foucault and post-structuralist understandings of the body, power, knowledge, institutions and order offer a means of achieving this. For instance, early twentieth-century educators claimed

that sport aided in the development of an appropriately masculine and capitalist character, resulting in the emergence of a hegemonic masculinity that privileged the categories White, heterosexual and middle class. Within this privileging, how did/does sport help to construct racial categories and meanings? Where do the discourses of sport and race intersect? How does the discourse of the body inform the discourse of race? How do discursive constructions of sport, race, and the body implicate Black males? A turn toward race provides a means to interrogate race and sport differently: to investigate nuances, layers, and interplay, to consider the interrelationships between race and sport, to re-assess the categories we accept as givens. Finally, this turn offers a way out of the 'stuck places' of thinking about race and sport. It offers a way of examining race (and racism) as more than the reasons why, but rather as the principles, ideologies, and myths that are actively reproduced and reified within sport.



A great group at the Nittany Lion sculpted by Heinz Wasneke, class of 1940.