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## **How Track and Field Undermined Support for Jim Crow Policies in Intercollegiate Sports**

Between 1896 (Plessy v. Ferguson) and 1948 (the Executive Order to integrate the Armed Services) – popularly known as the Jim Crow era – opportunities for African-Americans to participate in intercollegiate athletics were severely limited. Southern colleges were totally segregated and Northern and Western colleges rarely featured African-American athletes in any sport. Athletic scholarships were generally prohibited, while racial prejudices together with "gentlemen's agreements" limiting minority participation in intercollegiate sports were common. The Western Conference (Big Ten), for example, excluded African-Americans from intercollegiate basketball and the entire conference averaged fewer than three African-American football players per season during the entire Jim Crow era. By contrast, participation of African-Americans in track and field was far less restrictive.

Starting with Spencer Dickerson and progressing through John Baxter Taylor, George Poage, Howard Drew, "Sol" Butler, "Ned" Gourdin, William DeHart Hubbard, Eddie Tolan, Ralph Metcalfe, Willis Ward, and the twelve African-American track athletes on the 1936 Olympic track team, African-American athletes found an outlet for their athletic talent in intercollegiate track and field. Over the fifty-two year Jim Crow era, African-Americans won 90 AAU championships, 56 NCAA championships, and 32 Olympic medals. In the face of crushing apartheid restrictions, black track and field athletes became national heroes, obtained college educations, and played an important role in ending Jim Crow restrictions. They became school principals, lawyers and judges, and community leaders. They also made wider participation available for African-American athletes in football and basketball. Finally, the experience of black track and field athletes during the Jim Crow period foreshadowed the problems experienced by black athletes in other sports over the last half of the twentieth century.

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