

Review Article

Ethnicity and Race in North American Sport

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George Eisen and David K Wiggins, eds., *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*. Greenwood Press, Westport, 1994.

This collection features twelve, chronologically-arranged essays on ethnic and racial experiences in nineteenth and twentieth century American sport. The editors' claim that the anthology is 'an initial step in discovering a never-explored piece of our cultural heritage' is disingenuous, given the burgeoning literature that has ably demonstrated that sport is a cultural institution through which ethnic and racial groups gain acceptance in society, and whereby assimilation and pluralism have been resolved in often unpredictable, contradictory ways. The fact that both editors and contributors neglected to draw clear connections or demonstrate knowledge of the larger field of cultural history, is unfortunate, since as Elliott Gorn and Michael Oriard have recently maintained, cultural studies—the interdisciplinary analysis of history, cultural expression, and power—is precisely where the study of sports is most urgently needed.¹

As we know, immigrants' sporting experience was mediated by nationality, social class, degree of acculturation, and geographic orientation. Through his judicious documentation and historical contextualisation, Ralph Wilcox examines the contributions of Irish immigrants to nineteenth century American sport. Socially and politically-active first generation Irish-Americans championed popular 'American' sports (transplanted by Englishmen) which constituted, according to Wilcox, not total assimilation, but an intermediate stage of acculturation, given their insistence on using Gaelic team names and taking every opportunity to 'parade the green' in the sporting arena. Wilcox, however, conspicuously neglects Elliott Gorn's important 1986 work, *The Manly Art*, which deals intelligently with nineteenth century Irish-American athletes. In contrast, second-generation ethnic Americans saw sport as a

powerful sense of belonging to the only culture they knew first-hand. Eric Solomon illustrates how baseball offered Jews an avenue of acculturation into the dominant culture that countered the popular 'effete', 'bookish' stereotype of their parents. Although a nice synthesis of well-known middle-class literary snippets about Jews and baseball (nothing about the working-class Jewish experience), Solomon's essay relies overwhelmingly on several commentators and conspicuously ignores Peter Levine's excellent book on the American Jewish experience in sports.²

Our Knowledge of sport and ethnicity is based overwhelmingly on male sporting experiences. Gerald Gems shifts the focus from this well-researched story to a consideration of how women's leisure activities secured both accommodation with dominant American society and a measure of relief from male domination in other areas in their lives.³ Gems's diligent research in Chicago primary sources enables him to assess the impact of corporate and municipal assimilationist athletic programs on immigrant women, which taught not only 'American ways', but offered women the cultural wherewithal to 'encroach' upon the male domain. Ethnic women's struggles for cultural liberation were, however, so thoroughly besieged by class and religious constraints that they were unable to challenge patriarchy and middle-class 'American' values in any sort of uniform manner.

American sport historiography is strongest in chronicling European immigrants' sporting experiences, but as yet, is weak on Asian and Latin Americans' contributions. Alison Wrynn breaks new ground in her study of first and second generational conflicts within the Japanese-American internment camps of the World War II era. Government-sponsored sport also reflected strategies for social control to eliminate discontent and social friction that would, inevitably, result from boredom, inactivity, and incarceration. Reflective of recent scholarly interest in the social history of internment camps in the western US and Nazi Germany prison camps, Wrynn's research suggests some fruitful cross-cultural comparisons which would have been enhanced had she engaged this literature more explicitly. Nevertheless, she suggests that sport and games provided Japanese-Americans with diversion, escape from a horrific reality, and a source of pride and solidarity. Clearly, sport was both a vehicle of incorporation and of resistance.

Several contributors detail how sport enabled immigrants to

challenge dominant political assumptions in North American society. Robert Barney documents the considerable contributions of nineteenth century 'radical' German Turners to sport and physical education through preserving Old World sporting ways in the United States. Bruce Kidd scrutinises the Eastern-European socialist Canadian Workers' Sports Federation during the interwar years (1920s-1930s) as an episode of how a group of twentieth century immigrants contested 'bourgeois' sport within Canadian society. Immigrants sought to perpetuate homeland sports as a way of maintaining contact with those left behind, while simultaneously, supporting cultural networks that sustained their identity in new surroundings. 'In the small company towns of Canada's resource hinterland' (p. 202), Kidd writes, radical immigrants used sport to mount a total culture of opposition to the harsh capitalism in which they lived and created the beginnings of a new society by organising classcentred athletics in a way that transcended ethno-cultural rivalries.⁴

There are two fine essays on African-Americans in sport. J Thomas Jable demonstrates the importance of social class status within the late nineteenth century Philadelphia black community through an investigation of the Pythian Baseball Club which promoted a sense of racial solidarity, but its overwhelmingly mulatto, lower middle-class and artisanal membership dramatised how, like its white counterparts, black sport was powerfully stratified by skin colour and social class status. David Wiggins casts these and other issues within a cogent survey of major problems in African-American sports history. Based on secondary sources and his earlier work, the imminently useful primer illustrates how African-American athletes devised an assortment of responses to their uncertain position in sport that served as 'both a palliative [*sic*] and source of liberation' (p. 134).

What underlying generalisations and avenues for future research can be gleaned from this diverse collection of essays? Unfortunately, the editors championed the historiographical significance of the collection in general, inconclusive terms. As to ethnic experiences in American sport, let me suggest several basic unanswered questions that would assist future efforts toward synthesis. If the New World fed dreams, what was the Old World reality that whetted the appetite for them, and how did that reality caress and grip the shaping of a new one? To what extent did dominant political and cultural institutions promote anti-immigrant sports traditions? Did immigrants' acceptance of 'dominant'

sporting traditions imply acceptance and assimilation? Under what conditions did they reject preferred sport forms and ideas? When and how did new sport forms emerge from the outcome of negotiation or struggle?

My suggestions about the relationship between race and sport are more extensive. Scholars have been reticent to analyse the negotiated struggles between blacks and whites within the sporting arena. For example, I question the veracity of Wiggins's claim that sport has been 'one of the most conservative, tradition-laden institutions in America', which 'forced' black athletes to conform to accepted, 'white' standards of performance. There is abundant evidence to suggest that African-American baseball and basketball teams popularised a distinctly 'black' style of play, which ultimately became the dominant style in both sports. As Stephen Fox shows, white observers at black games encountered a 'faster, rougher and more daring brand of baseball than the slower white game where players swung from their heels and played a slobby longball'.⁵ Writer Mark Harris has similarly explained how black players brought their flair for 'trickery, their 'jazz-like innovation, their defiance of "the Book", the nonchalance of the one-handed catch'—all of which made the game exciting in ways it might not otherwise have been.⁶ They also developed a critique of white baseball and white culture. Journalist Nelson George has examined the development of basketball from its white, Muscular Christian origins to the racial integration of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the game's place in the history of black-white relations. Unlike its regimented, methodical white counterpart, black basketball resonated with a fluid, 'no sweat' attitude everybody called 'cool'. George argues that innovative passing and dribbling, one-on-one challenges, and slam dunks represent the same 'black aesthetic' as jazz and blues music—namely, individual virtuosity within an ensemble. Such work refutes the notion that black athletes merely conformed to white performance standards, and prompts analysis of how this faster, more exuberant 'black' style affected both the style of major league play and white audiences' spectatorial experience.⁷

The development of distinctive playing styles has been recorded in other societies where whites have settled outside Europe. C L R James described a distinctive black West Indian style of cricket in his magisterial *Beyond a Boundary* (1962). Additionally, John Nauright identifies similar differences in styles of play between mixed race or 'Coloured' rugby and

cricket and the white versions of the game in his work on South Africa.⁸ From the Trobriand Islands, Fiji and Western Samoa to North America and the West Indies to Africa and India, indigenous people and disadvantaged groups have adapted sporting styles to their broader popular culture and to their forms of cultural resistance. If North American historians of sport will take a wider view and situate their work in a broader comparative context, some of the limitations in analysis of 'race' and sport may begin to evaporate.

Perhaps, as I have suggested elsewhere, future explorations of the African-American sporting experience should transcend a singular reliance on 'race' as an analytically sufficient concept.⁹ Several prominent African-American intellectuals have already done so. Historian Barbara Fields argues persuasively that 'race' is actually an ideology, and therefore, not that useful for analysis of historical relationships.¹⁰ Accentuating this revisionist perspective, historian Jeffrey Sammons has recently written that scholars need to address race "'openly, directly, and cautiously'", for to do otherwise, undermines any attempt to expand understanding of sport history'.¹¹ Similarly, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison notes the powerful and persuasive attempts to analyse the origin and fabrication of racism, but, according to her, it is precisely because of this popular scholarly focus that only marginal progress has been made in matters of racial discourse. Philosopher Cornell West believes that a new framework should begin not with the 'problems' of black people, but rather, the systemic flaws of American society. Rather than analysing the separateness of 'white' and 'black' people, West recommends that we acknowledge the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us and our common history, much the way that Langston Hughes did in his poem 'Theme For English B'. As Hughes wrote: You are white/yet a part of me, as I am a part of you./ That's American./Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me./Nor do I want to be a part of you./But we are, that's true'.¹²

Such an ambitious project requires, however, a conceptual centre. Following Cornell West and urban historian Thomas Bender, I suggest the utility of the concept 'public culture' in constructing a new paradigm.¹³ As a forum where power in its various forms is elaborated and made authoritative, 'public culture' resolves not only the problematical nature of the 'nation', but the fluid struggles among races, classes, sexes, social groups, and ideas for cultural authority. Historically, the fundamental

measures of power manifested through sport, as sociologist Richard Gruneau has written, have been the capacity to establish selective, legitimate' sports traditions and to institutionalise such preferences in rules and resilient organisations.¹⁴ Conflicts over such processes are waged in public culture, and as such, are shaped by a wide spectrum of class and political interests. If situated within a more nuanced understanding of culture and ideology in capitalist society, future studies of the African-American sporting experience can, for instance, transcend the assimilationist versus self-sufficiency conundrum. Since the 1940s, African-Americans have been essentially united in their desire to achieve equality under the law, end overt and covert racism, and acquire power both inside and outside their own circles, but changes in technology, commerce, black ownership, and cultural aesthetics collectively weakened black institutions. Although racial discrimination was (and is) an important factor, scholars must analyse these phenomena in terms of how corporate market institutions have exercised a disproportionate influence on how society is run and how culture is shaped by images of consumption and pleasure, machismo, femininity, violence, and sexual stimulation.

Sport provides perhaps the only extensive field of surveying black male ambition in a context where its expression has had a significant impact on American culture at large. Do American professional athletics, as Gerald Early ponders, illuminate both the triumph and tragedy of black male ambition, whereby success is flawed by the very menacing (structural) limitations that obscure their meaning? Few scholars have bothered to inquire, as Early has, into what ambition and achievement mean for black (and white) men, since they are usually studied only in terms of their inadequacies and failures, rather than people pursuing excellence that demands nothing more than repetition. As to the issue of black 'role models' (that Wiggins highlights) scholars might follow Mike Marqusee's lead and connect the issue to the continued growth of sport as big business and which has placed an even greater distance between the African-American masses and their heroes who now wrap themselves in the flag and declare their Christian faith while selling themselves to the highest bidder—be it Nike, Reebok, Pepsi, or whomever.¹⁵ In short, the 'role model' issue is not a 'race'-specific phenomenon, since the distance between wealthy, white sports stars to their rank-and-file fans is also tied to both prevailing race relations as

well as to the 'logic' of corporate capitalism. Jim McKay explains this phenomenon well in his 1995 article "'Just Do It": Corporate Sports Slogans and the Political Economy of "Enlightened Racism"' where he shows how 'protest' changed from the overtly political resistance in the Black Power salute in the 1968 Olympics to the covering of the Reebok logo by Nike signed members of the US basketball 'Dream Team' of 1992.¹⁶

Future studies of ethnicity and race in sport should recognise how sports are social practices constituted by historically prescribed social, economic, and political structures in modern capitalist societies.¹⁷ In sum, this anthology is a useful contribution to our knowledge of ethnicity and race in North American sport. Perhaps its most enduring achievement is, however, a progress report on what remains to be done, not only in North America, but internationally as well.

NOTES:

- 1 Elliott Gorn and Michael Oriard, 'Taking Sports Seriously', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 24 Mar. 1995. See also Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure Into Consumption*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990, pp. 1-44; and Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1993.
- 2 Peter Levine, *From Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience*, OUP, New York, 1992.
- 3 See also Gems, 'Working-Class Women and Sport: An Untold Story', *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1993, pp. 17-30.
- 4 See also Mark Naison, 'Lefties and Righties: The Communist Party and Sport During the Great Depression', *Radical America*, vol. 13, 1979, pp. 47-59; and William J Baker, 'Muscular Marxism and the Chicago Counter Olympics of 1932', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 9, no. 3, Dec. 1992, pp. 397-410.
- 5 Stephen Fox, *Big Leagues: Professional Baseball, Football and Basketball in National Memory*, Morrow, New York, 1994, pp. 300-48.
- 6 Mark Harris, 'Where've You Gone, Jackie Robinson?' *The Nation*, 15 May 1995, p. 676.
- 7 Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball*, Harper-Collins, New York, 1992.
- 8 See John Nauright, *Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa*, Leicester University Press, in press.
- 9 Steven W Pope, review of John Carroll, Fritz Pollard, in *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1992, p. 268.
- 10 Barbara Fields, 'Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America', *New Left Review*, no. 181, 1990, pp. 95-118.
- 11 Jeffrey Sammons, "'Race" and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1994, p. 205.
- 12 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Vintage, New York, 1992; and Cornell West, *Race Matters*, Beacon, Boston, 1993.
- 13 Thomas Bender, 'Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History', *Journal of American History*, vol. 73, 1986.

- 14 Richard Gruneau, 'Modernization or Hegemony: Two Views of Sport and Social Development', in J Harvey and H Cantelon, eds., *Not Just a Game: Essays in Canadian Sport Sociology*, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 1988.
- 15 Mike Marqusee, 'Sport and Stereotype: From Role Model to Muhammed Ali', *Race and Class*, vol. 36, April-June 1995, pp. 1-30.
- 16 Jim McKay, "'Just Do It": Corporate Sports Slogans and the Political Economy of "Enlightened Racism"', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1995, pp. 191-201.
- 17 Steven Pope, 'Negotiating the "Folk Highway" of the Nation: Sport, Public Culture and American Identity, 1870-1940', *Journal of Social History*, pp. 333-4; and Pope, 'Toward a New Paradigm', in Steven Pope, ed., *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, in press.