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Chapter 27

# Sport as Contested Terrain

Douglas Hartmann

## Introduction

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu begins his well-known "Program for a Sociology of Sport" with a parable about African-American athletes in prestigious American universities in the early 1970s. Despite their seeming public prominence and importance, Bourdieu recounts (1988), these student-athletes found themselves in "golden ghettos" of isolation where conservatives were reluctant to talk with them because they were black, while liberals were hesitant to converse with them because they were athletes. This absurd situation and the vivid image Bourdieu uses to capture it serves as an introduction to, and illustration of, the argument about race and sport that I intend to develop in this essay. In many ways, the unparalleled athletic prominence and prowess of African-American athletes is one of the most striking and seemingly progressive features of a society otherwise marked by persistent racial inequalities. Yet, at the same time, it is not clear if success in sport consistently contributes to racial progress and justice. Even more problematic, there are ways in which this sporting success actually seems to reinforce and reproduce images, ideas and social practices that are thoroughly racialized, if not simply racist.

In the pages that follow I will explore such tensions in the context of a review and critique of existing ways of understanding the relationships between race and sport in American culture.[1] These can be usefully divided into two schools of thought: those which see sport as a positive, progressive racial force and those which see sport as thoroughly implicated in the maintenance and reproduction of existing racial stereotypes and hierarchies. Rather than trying to resolve them completely, I will argue that the tensions between these two camps constitute the defining characteristic of the American sport–race nexus. More specifically, I want to suggest, borrowing from Stuart Hall (1981, see also 1996), that sport is best understood as a "contested racial terrain," a social site where racial images, ideologies, and inequalities are constructed, transformed, and constantly struggled over. It is an exercise which is intended not only to clarify our understanding of the racial significance of sport but also to reiterate the deep and multifaceted ways in which race is implicated in American culture.

This essay is compiled from two previous works: "Rethinking the relationships between sport and race in American culture: Golden ghettos and contested terrain." *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 2000, 17, 3:229–53; and "Race, culture, and the case of sport." *Culture*, 2000, 14,2:1–6. Permission to use them here is gratefully acknowledged.

My starting point is Bourdieu's insistence that sport be taken seriously *and* treated critically as a social – or in this case, racial – force. The extraordinary and highly visible success of African-American athletes I just mentioned (despite constituting only 12 percent of the American populace, African Americans comprise 80 percent of the players in professional basketball, 67 percent in football and 18 percent in baseball, Eitzen, 1999:136–7) is just one of the reasons why it is necessary to begin from this assumption. Another has to do with sport's prominent place in the public culture and the mass media. Large numbers of Americans across racial lines interact with sport and are impacted by its remarkable racial dynamics. Making the sheer demographics of these sport-based interactions even more socially significant is the passion that practices of sport inculcate among those whose lives they touch. Often in very different ways, but to a degree with few correlates in American life, sports fans (especially men[2]) tend to care deeply about sport, and feel free to express strong opinions about sport and the issues they encounter in its social space. That so many sport discussions and debates are not consciously recognized as having broader societal causes, connections, and consequences only, in my view, accentuates sport's racial power and importance further still. Sport, to redeploy Ralph Ellison's classic depiction of the African American, is at once an invisible and hypervisible racial terrain. Finally there are the obvious parallels between dominant liberal democratic ideals (and their optimistic, color-blind vision of racial harmony and justice) and sport's own culture of fairness and meritocracy. All of this is simply to insist that the interesting and important question is not *whether* sport is a significant racial force but *what kind of a racial force is sport?*

## Alternative Views of Sport as a Racial Force

There are two existing ways of thinking about the racial force of sport that any serious student of the subject must take into account: one is popular or even commonsensical, the other is scholarly and deeply critical of the first. Juxtaposing these two very different visions – which I call the "popular ideology" and the "scholarly critique" – and their respective insights and shortcomings against each other is the first step toward developing a full and satisfactory understanding of the complex relationships between sport and race in the United States.

### *The popular ideology*

Dominant cultural conceptions of sport's racial impact can be stated easily enough. Sport is seen by most Americans as a positive and progressive racial force, an avenue of racial progress and an arena of racial harmony. It is understood as a "way out of the ghetto," the great racial "equalizer," a leader in civil rights if not a literal "model" for race relations in the United States.

The notion that sport is a positive and progressive racial force has a long history in American culture. Leaders of the sporting establishment have trumpeted such claims at least since the spectacular athletic accomplishments of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens in the 1930s, and the basic empirical-intellectual foundations for the argument were laid in 1939 with the publication of Edwin Bancroft Henderson's seminal study *The Negro in Sports*. But the ideology probably reached its high point in the late 1950s and early 1960s





with the fall of the color-line in professional baseball, that self-proclaimed American pastime. It was in the wake of this success that one of the most prominent African-American sportswriters of the day, a man named A. S. "Doc" Young (1963), proclaimed that Willie Mays was as important a figure for civil rights as Martin Luther King, Jr. and that Jackie Robinson ranked next to Jesus Christ among the most important and honorable men ever to have walked the earth.

Today, it is rare to hear bold and unqualified statements about sport's positive racial force (at least in part for a want of supporting empirical verification). But the relative dearth of clearly articulated and empirically supported claims that sport is a positive, progressive racial force does not mean that the notion has fallen out of favor. Quite the contrary, I believe that the absence of empirical investigation and systematic argumentation is actually evidence of how deeply held and commonsensical it has come to be in American culture. The notion that sport is a positive, progressive racial force is more than just an idea, it is an ideology, an idea that has taken on a life of its own. It doesn't need to be restated or defended. It is cultural commonsense, an article of faith held by Americans, black and white, liberal and conservative, even those who don't care about sport in any other way.

A 1996 poll conducted for *U.S. News and World Report* and Bozell Worldwide found that 91 percent of Americans think that "participation in sports" helps a "person's ability to . . . get along with different ethnic or racial groups."[3] The popular frenzy that surrounds superstar African-American athletes such as Tiger Woods, or the fact that President Clinton chose to devote one of his three national "town-hall" meetings on race exclusively to sport, are both examples of the prominent and essentially positive racial meanings expressed in and through sport in mainstream American culture. So powerful and widely taken for granted are these ideas that commentators who want to affirm sport's general societal contributions routinely invoke racial examples to make their case. Michael Novak's (1976) and A. Barlett Giamatti's (1989) well-known celebrations of American sport are perfect examples. Despite the fact that neither book has much to say about race, both place Jackie Robinson's integration story prominently in their texts. Perhaps the most powerful illustration of the power of sport's progressive racial ideology came from the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia. I am referring here not just to the top performances of African-American athletes such as Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson, or Jackie Joyner Kersee but more to the fact that Atlanta won the right to host the Games because the International Olympic Committee believed it would display for the peoples of the world a model of racial harmony, progress, and prosperity. These connections between sport and racial progress were drawn most forcefully in the pre-Olympic stump speeches of Andrew Young, the former mayor of Atlanta and the cochair of the Atlanta Organizing Committee who touted the Olympic Movement as the secular, global realization of his friend and mentor Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream for a truly color-blind society.

### *The scholarly critique*

In stark contrast to this sport-as-positive-racial force ideology stand a plethora of empirically grounded scholarly criticisms of the racial form and function of sport. Inspired by athletic activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s,[4] the primary objective and accomplishment of these works has been to demonstrate that racial inequalities and

injustices are not so much challenged and overcome in and through sport as they are reproduced and reinforced there. The dominant motif is captured succinctly in the subtitle of one recent (if highly controversial) contribution to the field: "How Sport has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race" (Hoberman, 1997).

Two very different strands of research and writing contribute to this critique. One, which I refer to as an institutional approach, analyzes the racial character and organization of the sports world itself. Its primary task and preoccupation has been to demonstrate persistent patterns of racial discrimination, exploitation, and oppression in sport. This case has been made convincingly. In their 1991 review of sport sociology, the leading disciplinary home of this work, James H. Frey and D. Stanley Eitzen summarized:

> The major conclusion of this work . . . is that just as racial discrimination exists in society, [so also] it exists in sport. Blacks do not have equal opportunity; they do not receive similar rewards for equal performance when compared to whites; and their prospects for a lucrative career beyond sport participation are dismal. (Frey and Eitzen, 1991:513)

Exposing the deeply racialized character of sport has implications far beyond the world of sport. These are closely connected with the popular ideology that sport is a model of, and institutional symbol for, race relations in the United States. If even sport doesn't live up to liberal-democratic ideals, what does this suggest about their limits as defining standards for racial progress and justice?

Here it is worth noting that one of the most important and controversial claims of recent critical scholarship on whiteness is that liberal-democratic political ideologies are themselves inherently racialized owing to the inevitable social limitations (or contradictions) of their claims to abstract, universal citizenship. Racial categories are, in other words, built into the cultural structure of Western nationalism and liberal democracy. I don't know that we need to go this far. But my own work on the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement (Hartmann, 1996, forthcoming) – the movement most widely associated with the clenched-fist salute given by two African-American athletes on the Olympic victory stand in Mexico City in 1968 – has been directly influenced by such thinking. Indeed, I follow anthropologist John MacAloon (1988) in arguing that these athletes were initially received as villains, extremists, and traitors for doing little more than calling attention to their own blackness precisely because race was not an identity allowed by time-honored Olympic ritual (which itself is directly and self-consciously posited on traditional, Western conceptions of individuals, nations, and humanity and the appropriate relations among them). They were treated this way, that is, because calling attention to race exposed and threatened to disrupt the otherwise comfortable homologies among sport culture, Olympic symbolism, and liberal-democratic ideology. The point here (usually only implicit in most institutional critiques) is that the color-blind, assimilationist values at the root of liberal-democratic theory and much sport culture make it difficult to even recognize racial categories, much less provide mechanisms to address the structural inequalities that typically go along with them.

The second variation on the scholarly critique of sport builds from this notion, attending specifically to the symbolic role that sport plays in American culture with respect to race. This symbolic critique, which has emerged only in the last decade or so





but already has some impressive proponents, begins from the undeniable and unparalleled success of African Americans in sport and sport's own widespread public prominence and power. But rather than seeing these social facts as a progressive political development (as the popular ideology would have it) these scholars hold that the powerful presence of African American athletes in American culture may actually perpetuate and reinforce the racial status quo. This claim derives from a deep, critical conception of the role of mass-mediated, market-based cultural forms such as sport in generating contemporary racial images and ideologies. At the core of this conception is the enormous gap between highly visible and often highly paid African Americans and those of the vast majority of African Americans – and the fact that many mainstream, middle-class Americans are unwilling or unable to recognize this disjuncture. In this context, African American athletes come to serve as what David Andrews (1996), borrowing from Derrida, calls a "floating racial signifier": dynamic, complex, and contradictory, they can be interpreted in virtually any way an audience wants.

Given the persistence of race and racism in American culture, the prominence of African-American athletes thus tends to serve one of three racializing functions. One is that attention to African American athletic success can deflect attention away from, obscure, or minimize the more general problems of racial inequality and racism. Secondly and even worse, the cultural prominence of African-American athletes can be used to legitimate existing racial inequalities by making it seem as if there are no racial barriers standing in the way of African-American mobility and assimilation. If in sport, the thinking goes, why not in other social spheres? The third point has to do with the claim that images of African-American athletes are thoroughly racialized, indelibly linked with the racial stereotypes that permeate the culture.

What is complicated about this final point is that it runs counter to many of our usual social and sociological assumptions about racism and prejudice. We tend to think of these phenomena negatively, in terms of beliefs and behaviors that exclude and privilege one racial group over another. Yet the images of African Americans in sport appear to be quite positive, even flattering and celebratory. The crucial point for critical sport scholars, however, is that what seems to be positive about these images tends to be exaggerated and one-dimensional, thus stripping African-American athletes of agency and working to reinforce imagined racial traits and characteristics. One of the most familiar strains of this argument focuses on the inherent physicality of sporting practices. The claim here, articulated most recently and controversially in John Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes* (1997), is that because of sport's *de facto* association with bodies, and the mind/body dualisms at the core of Western culture, the athletic success of African American athletes serves to reinforce racist stereotypes by grounding them in essentialized, biological terms where athletic prowess is believed to be inversely associated with intellectual and/or moral depravity. Cheryl Cole and her associates (Cole and Denny, 1994; Cole and Andrews, 1996) develop this argument in a somewhat different fashion by examining how media portrayals and the cultural commodification of African-American athletes typically exaggerate their social differences, on the one hand, and how quickly the celebration of racial difference can turn into a condemnation of social deviance, on the other. In one of her most provocative papers, in fact, Cole (1996) argues that there is a prevailing cultural logic that links, albeit by inversion, racial images in sport and racial images about crime. Sport's racial imagery thus constitutes and contributes to a rather insidious form of "enlightened racism" (McKay 1995) in which racial stereotypes and

hierarchies are reproduced even as mainstream audiences believe they are being subverted.[5] In any case, the point is clear: that racism is a complicated, multifaceted cultural system which often ironically finds expression in the celebration and consumption of racial difference itself.

## Criticism and Synthesis

As part of public discourse, these scholarly critiques provide a much-needed criticism and deconstruction of the hegemony of the sport-as-positive-racial-force ideology. They expose its empirical limitations with respect to both internal organization and broader symbolic function. Perhaps more importantly, they show how the unqualified acceptance of such an ideology can actually serve to legitimate and reproduce dominant racial meanings, practices, and hierarchies. For all of this, however, I think these critiques have often gone too far. In making these points they have too often simply exchanged one totalization (that sport is a positive force for racial change) for the other (that it is a negative, impeding one). Deconstruction, to put it even stronger, is virtually all these critiques have accomplished. And in failing to do more than deconstruct the popular ideology, these critiques have become (or at least threaten to become) a one-sided ideology of their own, an ideology which fails to appreciate the actual complexity and possibility of sport's place in the American racial order.

Stated differently, the problem with established sociological critiques is that for all the truth they contain, they see the popular ideology that sport is a progressive racial force strictly as a form of false consciousness, as *mere* ideology. The most prominent recent variation on this theme is probably John Hoberman's argument about the supposed "sports fixation" of African-American intellectuals and in the African-American community in general. This cynical, dismissive attitude makes it impossible for academic critics to grasp why popular beliefs appeal so widely, especially among those they are supposed to injure the most. And, as many of Hoberman's critics suggest,[6] there are good, solid empirical reasons for the popular perception of sport as a progressive racial force.

Some are quite familiar and conventional: for example, that sport has provided an avenue of opportunity and mobility for African Americans; that these athletic successes, in turn, have much broader community impacts whether as a space for social interaction and community building or symbol of racial accomplishment and source of pride and collective identification; and that sport provides many Anglo-Americans with some of their most positive and important interactions with people of color. But that doesn't make them any less accurate. While it may not be perfect, sport is also an unparalleled institutional site of accomplishment for African Americans and remains one of the most integrated institutions in American life. In recent years, in fact, a handful of scholars have produced works that are beginning to coalesce into a serious, scholarly defense of these points. For example, Nelson George (1992) describes memorably how in the case of basketball, sport has become a crucial social space for the development of an African-American identity and aesethetic. This distinctive cultural style has obviously been useful in terms of its market value, but it is more significant still, in theoretical terms, for its capacity to inspire productive, creative labor among African-American young people living in otherwise alienating and disadvantaged circumstances (see Wacquant, 1992; Dyson, 1993; and especially Kelley, 1997).





None of this is to now conclude that the scholarly critique of sport is totally wrong and the popular ideology completely correct. Rather, it is to insist that the relationships between sport and race are more complicated and contradictory than sociological critics have usually realized. More than this, it is to suggest that instead of choosing between these one-sided, totalizing perspectives we would do better to blend their insights, to shape them into a broader theoretical synthesis. What we need, in other words, is a theory that is deeply and (once again) properly critical of the popular belief that sport is a pure and perfect arena of racial progress, but which is, at the same time, able to allow that sport may affect positive, progressive racial change under certain conditions, in certain social settings, and for certain kinds of racial concerns.

### *Sport as contested racial terrain*

At the core of such a synthesis is the notion that sport is a kind of "double-edged sword" (Kellner, 1996) or what I will call, extending from Stuart Hall (1981), a "contested racial terrain." That is to say, sport is not just a place (or variable) whereby racial interests and meanings are *either* inhibited *or* advanced but rather a site where racial formations are constantly – and very publicly – struggled on and over. The racial dynamics of sport are both positive and negative, progressive and conservative, defined by both possibilities for agency and resistance as well as systems of domination and constraint.

Thinking of sport as a contested racial terrain requires more than just an abstract balancing act of competing racial forms and forces, much less a simple calculation of "positive" and "negative" outcomes. In addition it must begin from and be grounded in a broad, theoretically informed understanding of the American racial order and the place of sport therein as well as of the paradoxical ways in which racial resistance and change are made in the contemporary, post-Civil Rights moment. A comprehensive treatment of this theoretical framework is obviously beyond the scope of a brief conclusion but two points are crucial.

The first, which I have alluded to already, has to do with social context. It is that the racial form and function of sport cannot be properly understood unless these are situated in the context of a society marked by stark and persistent racial inequalities. If African Americans tend to see sport positively, it is not because they are fixated on sport or even that sport is inherently progressive. (Indeed, there is some evidence – Siegelman, 1998 – that African Americans are no more fixated on sport than any other group of Americans.) Rather, it is because sport offers African Americans opportunities and resources rarely found in other institutions in the society. More than this, it helps us appreciate why sport plays a privileged and particularly prominent role in American culture with respect to race.

At the same time, situating sport in the context of racial meanings and practices broadly conceived guards against bringing unrealistic, overly optimistic hopes and expectations to our thinking about the racial form and the racial function of sport in the USA. Seeing sport in context is, in other words, a way to understand the paradoxical "golden ghettos" metaphor from Bourdieu which I used to begin this paper. A similar sensibility is reflected in the title "Glory Bound" which the sports historian David K. Wiggens (1997a) gives to a collection of his seminal essays on African American sport involvement in the twentieth century. The point for these scholars – Gerald Early's brilliant essays on boxing (1994, 1989) – must also be included here is that there is tremendous possibility for those who are

racially oppressed, but that these possibilities are always contained within the larger structure of a thoroughly racialized if not simply racist culture.

Thinking of sport as a contested racial terrain also requires a very particular understanding of the relationship between structure and agency. Here the point involves the general theoretical insight, at the core of Bourdieu's general theory of practice; namely, that structure and agency are not opposed or mutually exclusive but in fact deeply interconnected, even mutually constitutive. This is one of the key points of my own (previously cited) work on the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement: that as much as sport has functioned to structure and reinforce dominant racial formations in the post-Civil Rights era, the dynamics of racial domination have been intimately intertwined with and revealed by attempts at activism, resistance, and challenge. Resistance and domination, as well as opportunity and constraint, thus must be taken together.

The interrelationship of resistance and domination has been a central theme for several sport scholars. Loic Wacquant (1992), for example, explains the appeal of boxing to young African-American men in Chicago by situating the sport in the socioecological context of African-American life in impoverished, inner-city Chicago. Boxing is appealing, according to Wacquant, not because it reflects the disorder and disorganized of the surrounding communities but rather because boxers and boxing coaches define themselves "in opposition to the ghetto" as "islands of stability and order," "relatively self-enclosed site(s) for a protected sociability where one can find respite from the pressures of the street and ghetto," a "buffer against the attributes and dangers of ghetto life" (1992:229). In his discussion of basketball and various other popular cultural forms in which African-American young people from the inner city invest, Robin Kelley (1997) takes these points even further to emphasize the particular possibilities for racial resistance, creativity, and enjoyment that are at the heart of popular practices and preferences such as sport. The point, for Kelley, is not just that agency is constituted in relationship to structures of racial domination in and around sport. The point, in addition, is that a popular cultural form such as sport is a particularly important site for racial resistance because it is one of the few arenas open and encouraged for African Americans in an otherwise deeply racist society.

Of course, it is one thing to point out the possibilities for individual agency, creativity, mobility, and resistance available in and through sport; it is quite another to be optimistic about the larger political implications of all this. Indeed, many scholarly critiques of sport grant the former but deny the latter (cf. Page, 1997). If resistance goes hand in hand with domination, in this view, resistance is always extremely limited, partial, and contained. There is a good deal of wisdom in this way of thinking. But however typical this outcome may be, it is important to remember that it is precisely because sporting practices are so thoroughly racialized that they present much larger scale opportunities and possibilities for social mobilization and change. This is, I think, why many of its most prominent public critics – organizations such as Lapchick's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, the NAACP, or Jesse Jackson's Operation Push – target sport: because of its prominence and the prominence of African-American athletes therein. Sport is not just a site for the reproduction of racial stereotypes and formations but also a site of potential struggle and challenge against them. It is, as I have suggested before in reappropriating Bourdieu's famous phrase, a source (or at least potential source) of cultural capital that can be directed toward larger struggles for racial justice in the USA. Again, it may not be that using sport to deliberate political effect is an easy proposition in the contemporary,





post-Civil Rights era (because of the different nature of the racial structures being struggled against). But then again sport's contribution to the movement against racism in the US was never, in any case, automatic or easy. Indeed, as Jeffrey Sammons (1994) makes clear in his excellent review of the still-burgeoning historical literature, racial progress in and through sport never came easily or automatically but rather slowly and unevenly, and almost always only as the result of protracted, deliberate struggles and repressive counterresistance.

So, then, the essence of what it means to think about sport as a contested racial terrain is threefold. First, the relationships between sport and race are more complicated and indeed often contradictory than either popular audiences or sport specialists realize. Second, they are constituted within the structure of a culture that is thoroughly racialized. And third, because of sport's prominence in American culture and sport's own unique racial characteristics, these relationships have meaning and consequence far beyond the usual boundaries of the sporting world itself, meanings and consequences which can reproduce or – especially if invested with political intent – transform racial formations broadly conceived. Thinking of sport as a "contested racial terrain," therefore, not only stands as an alternative to both popular ideologies and scholarly critiques of sport's racial form and function, but is actually a theoretical synthesis of the two.

There is obviously much more that could be said here. But let me conclude simply by reiterating that thinking of sport in this way should also make clear that a full theory of sport and race interactions has as much to do with how we understand race, racism, and the complexity of struggles against them as with how we think about sport itself. If sport is golden for African Americans, it is mainly because of its unique place in and relationship to the prevailing structures of the metaphorical racial ghetto itself. This is neither a criticism nor a celebration of sport; it is simply an observation about the ironies of race and resistance in contemporary, post-Civil Rights American culture.

## Notes

1 I focus on the African-American athletic experience both because this the case I know best and because it is the one from which most theories of sport and race interactions derive and depart. In any case I hope that it will have much broader applications and generalizable qualities.

2 I might also point out that what I have to say about race and sport is oriented toward, if not centered upon, males and masculinity. There are many reasons for this, but the most important ones are practical and, unfortunately, may obscure many important and consequential intersections (and disruptions) between race and gender in sport and in American culture. Radio stations dedicated almost exclusively to sport talk are perhaps the more recent and most obvious example of the significance of discussions and debates that take place in and around sport. See Goldberg (1998) for a recent discussion and analysis.

3 The poll, which surveyed 1000 people by telephone in a random national sample, was conducted in May of 1996 by the Tarrance Group, Lake Research, and KRC (TARR).

4 For contemporaneous descriptions of this movement, see Harry Edwards (1969) and Jack Olsen (1968). For more recent and somewhat more critical discussion and analysis see Hartmann (1996, forthcoming); Wiggens (1997b, 1988) and Spivey (1984). It is also worth recalling that Edwards, widely known as the leader of the movement, was one of the leading practitioners of and spokespersons for the race-based critique of sport. Some of his ideas can be found in *Sociology of Sport* (1973), one of the first widely used sociology of sport textbooks in the country.

5 See also Wonsek (1992); Werner (1995); Boyd (1997); Wilson (1997).

6 For discussions see Sammons (1997), Smith and Shropshire (1998), and the reviews collected in symposia in the *Social Science Quarterly* (December 1998), the *International Journal of the Sociology of Sport* (March 1998), and *Black Issues in Higher Education* (April 1998). I should also note that sports fixation thesis is not inherently liberal or conservative. Indeed, Harry Edwards has long advanced similar claims. The problem with both standard liberal and conservative formulations, in my view, is their failure to situate the African-American experience in sport within the larger context of living in and struggling against a deeply racialized culture (see Edwards, 1984).

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