

To “Bring the Race along Rapidly”: Sport, Student Culture, and Educational Mission at Historically Black Colleges during the Interwar Years

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“Athletics is the universal language,” an editorialist asserted in the Howard University campus newspaper in the spring of 1924. “By and through it we hope to foster a better and more fraternal spirit between the races in America and so to destroy prejudices; to learn and to be taught; to facilitate a universal brotherhood.”¹ Such sentiments had been enunciated since the turn of the century. But it was during the interwar years that the athletic ideal resonated most intensely for various commentators on the prospects for racial reform. Capturing the belief shared by numerous African American leaders that the football gridiron and baseball diamond, the track oval, and even the boxing ring offered significant platforms for proving equality, the Howard student writer carefully articulated the widespread desire that black athletes might engage white society in a broad-based dialogue about democratic principles and practices. Ideally, the success of African Americans in sport would provide powerful lessons in “interracial education.”²

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¹Howard University *Hilltop*, 29 Apr. 1924.

²On the African American experience in sports generally, see Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *The Negro in Sports* (Washington, D.C., 1939); idem, *The Black Athlete: Emergence and Arrival* (New York, 1968); Cciana Chalk, *Pioneers of Black Sport: The Early Days of the Black Professional Athlete in Baseball, Basketball, Boxing, and Football* (New York, 1975); idem, *Black College Sport* (New York, 1976); Arthur Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete* (New York, 1988). The qualification for boxing is noteworthy. While newspapers extolled the achievements of black boxers, periodicals like *Crisis*, edited from 1910 to 1933 by W. E. B. Du Bois, opposed prize-fighting as an emblem of racial pride and aspiration. On blacks and boxing, see Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack*

Acting on these hopes, many spokesmen for uplift and assimilation strenuously promoted the organization of sports in the schools and colleges of the South. Working behind the veil of segregation in an environment overwhelmingly hostile to any claims of black self-worth, a new generation of African American educators and students remained extremely conscious of their isolation, as well as their need for circumspection. They believed, nevertheless, that the cultivation of playing fields possessed enormous significance: athletic accomplishment could strengthen the sense of racial pride among black southerners and at the same time encourage them to identify with “national” pastimes. At the very least, games and races might relieve for a short time the burdens of labor, the daily ordeal of enforced deference. Edwin Bancroft Henderson, perhaps the most prominent commentator on African American sport during the first half of the twentieth century, stated his appraisal clearly, if condescendingly: “The glare and glamour [of athletics] attracted to scholastic halls many a backwoods boy and girl who would have been plowing and mating in the countryside untrained and in hum-drum living, but who now are being turned into high class more useful products of society.” Conceived in terms such as self-respect and social engagement, sport served many purposes. For many “New Negroes,” its potential role in forging racial solidarity as well as channeling the energy and aspirations of southern blacks seemed immense.³

From an early date, the ideal of muscular assimilationism was elaborated in educational practice. In 1906 the African American educator, Samuel Archer, extolled sport for the qualities of self-reliance and self-control that it was said to inculcate. The conditions under which games were then being played in the black colleges, he argued, were “very favorable for the development of the strong and aggressive in union with the gentle and the just.”⁴ Abiding by the athletic creed, many of those who sought to raise up the next generation similarly enumerated the values ascribed to disciplined training for competition on the playing fields. After the turn of the century, for instance, the catalog of “Wiley College proudly announced [that] ‘athletic sports are not only allowed, but encour-

Johnson and the Era of White Hopes (New York, 1983); Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 34–53.

³Concerning black education in the South, the principal works are James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988); and Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s* (Princeton, N.J., 1975). See also August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1963). “Glare and glamour” quotation from Edwin B. Henderson, “Sports,” *Messenger* 8 (Feb. 1926): 51.

⁴S. H. Archer, “Football in Our Colleges,” *Voice of the Negro* 3 (Mar. 1906): 199–205.

aged.'” At that small college in Marshall, Texas, institutional policy stressed the notion “that the best education is that which develops a strong, robust body as well as other parts of the human makeup.”⁵

Subscribing to the principles addressed by Samuel Archer and the Wiley catalog, though at the same time observing the racial landscape from a different perspective, an array of journalists and reformers vigorously applauded the efforts of stellar black athletes who won places on the teams of the predominantly white colleges of the North. Those athletes more than any others, Henderson declared, did “much to soften racial prejudices” and to advance “the cause of blacks everywhere.”⁶ In both substantive and symbolic terms, college sport offered a model for African American activists: the fulfillment of the gospel of athletic success would be manifest not only in headline performances, world records, and Olympic medals, but also in an increasing number of victories over Jim Crow and breaches of the color line. From the publicity won by such stars as Fritz Pollard, Paul Robeson, and Jesse Owens, to the occasions in the late thirties when the football squads of the University of North Carolina and Duke agreed to travel north and face a black competitor on a rival team, race leaders could take pride in the present and gather strength for future struggles.⁷

Indeed, to many spokesmen for the “talented tenth”—the editors of *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, for instance, as well as the publishers of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender*—the goal of integrating sport, in order “to facilitate a universal brotherhood,” was no less compelling than their concern about uplift. Within the boundaries of far-flung playing fields, prevailing biases could be contested and defeated, black reform-

⁵Wiley College Catalog, 1901, quoted in Michael R. Heintze, *Private Black Colleges in Texas, 1865–1954* (College Station, Tex., 1985), 171.

⁶Edwin B. Henderson, “Sports,” *Messenger* 8 (June 1926): 181. On the value of sport, see Henderson, “The Colored College Athlete,” *Crisis* 2 (July 1911): 115–19; Ira F. Lewis, “Our Colleges and Athletics,” *Competitor* 2 (Dec. 1920): 290–92; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 Dec. 1923.

⁷Several of these themes are explored more broadly in Patrick B. Miller, *The Playing Fields of American Culture: Athletics and Higher Education, 1850–1945* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), chs. 7, 8. For a sense of the breakthroughs as well as the setbacks in the desegregation of college sport during these years, see Donald Spivey, “‘End Jim Crow in Sports’: The Protest at New York University, 1940–1941,” *Journal of Sport History* 15 (Winter 1988): 282–303; and Patrick B. Miller, “Harvard and the Color Line: The Case of Lucien Alexis,” in *Sports in Massachusetts: Historical Essays*, ed. Ronald Story (Westfield, Mass., 1991), 137–58. For newspaper files on black sports heroes, see Scrapbook Collection, Sports, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and the Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File, Microfilm Collection, 1978, Tuskegee Institute, Ala. See also Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, 1983); William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York, 1986); Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York, 1988), 19–24; John M. Carroll, *Fritz Pollard: Pioneer in Racial Advancement* (Urbana, Ill., 1992).

ers suggested. Similarly, what for a growing number of African Americans was a new-found boldness could be forcefully communicated: athletic distinctions underscored the enormous potential of black Americans for achievement in all walks of life. In a telling commentary written in praise of two track-and-field champions from the 1932 Olympic Games, Arthur Howe, the president of Hampton Institute, asserted that the gold and silver medals won by Eddie Tolan and Ralph Metcalfe, respectively, should not be considered as merely a “source of pride and inspiration” for African Americans. The performances they registered, Howe maintained, also bespoke “many less advertised victories . . . in more significant realms.” Ultimately concerned about the ways to move black Americans from the margins to the mainstream of the political, economic, and social life of the nation, racial reformers hoped that such triumphs would challenge the dominant culture “to give the Negro his due in justice and opportunity.”⁸ Thus, the leaders of the NAACP and the National Urban League enlisted muscular assimilationism in the civil rights crusade.

At the same time that sports gained respect as a source of pride and a “vehicle” for social change, however, some African American observers recognized the enormous qualifications and conditions that shadowed the contributions hard work at play might make to the advancement of the race. During the 1920s and 1930s, numerous traditionally black institutions of higher education became embroiled in controversies over athletics similar to the scandals that plagued predominantly white colleges, where the violations of rules had become as well documented as they were flagrant and widespread. This was a cause of consternation among racial reformers like W. E. B. Du Bois, who feared that such episodes would draw public attention away from the hard-won scholastic achievements by black Americans. As a consequence, the proper organization and regulation of “the strenuous life” in the Southern schools—among the larger obligations of educational authorities to racial uplift—remained a constant concern for African American leaders through the first half of the twentieth century.

A more general apprehension, though one that would become sharper and ever more significant over the years, concerned the misrepresentation

⁸Arthur Howe, “Two Racers and What They Symbolize,” *Southern Workman* (Oct. 1932), 387. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, “Athletics in Negro Colleges,” in “Postscript,” *Crisis* 37 (June 1930): 209–10; George Streater, “Negro Football Standards,” *Crisis* 38 (Mar. 1931): 85–86; and idem, “Football in Negro Colleges,” *Crisis* 39 (Apr. 1932): 129–30, 139–41; Edwin Bancroft Henderson, “The Negro Athlete and Race Prejudice,” *Opportunity* 14 (Mar. 1936): 77–78. For an appraisal of this endeavor, see David K. Wiggins, “Wendell Smith, the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933–1945,” *Journal of Sport History* 10 (Summer 1983): 5–29.

of black achievement in sport. Even before the tenets of "scientific" racism were projected onto the playing fields, some African Americans anticipated that claims for equality of opportunity made through the bodies of black athletic heroes would provoke substantial resistance from the dominant culture. As early as 1905, William Pickens, a professor at Talladega College, averred that "some white people [would] accept from a Negro physical and athletic superiority but . . . stand aloof when one approaches with moral or intellectual superiority."⁹

Such presentiments would be confirmed several decades later, when black activists came to witness the betrayal of their trust in the notion that triumph in athletics readily translated into social progress. The notions "manly character" and "courage" had long connected physical prowess with other cultural ideals, the attributes of great generals and presidents for instance. Yet in response to African American ascendancy in sport, the mainstream press replaced those images with allusions to survival in some distant jungle or to a distinctive anatomy and physiology, references not to the cultivation of character and the hallmarks of modern civilization but to the natural and the primitive. Herein lay the paradox of muscular assimilationism as a strategy for racial reform: the standards and values by which African Americans strove to be judged have always been susceptible to manipulation by white America. Still, open competition remained an ideal central to civil rights activism. And numerous black physical educators and cultural commentators fervently embraced the athletic creed. Through achievement in sport, they ultimately hoped to demonstrate "the same traits of courage" said to characterize the dominant race.¹⁰

The substantial hopes held by many black Americans thus engaged the subtle fears of a few concerning the influence of athletics in revising social arrangements in the United States. Since so much was at stake, college students and their teachers, as well as journalists and reformers of many stripes, all contributed to the discussion about the proper means and ends of sporting competition, the role of athletics in black higher education, and the relative effectiveness of sport in subverting prevailing stereotypes. In addition to the wide-ranging conversation black athletes ideally would

⁹Pickens, letter to the editor, *Voice of the Negro* 2 (Aug. 1905): 559–60. Pickens went on to become a high-ranking official in the NAACP. See William Pickens, *The Heir of Slaves: The Autobiography of a "New Negro"* (edited by William L. Andrews and re-issued as *Bursting Bonds* [Bloomington, Ind., 1991]); see also Sheldon Avery, *Up from Washington: William Pickens and the Negro Struggle for Equality, 1900–1954* (Newark, Del., 1989).

¹⁰Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, 123; Ishmael P. Flory, "Walter Arthur Gordon: A Biographical Sketch," *Opportunity* 10 (Sep. 1932): 283–84, 292; Elmer A. Carter, "The Negro in College Athletics," *Opportunity* 11 (July 1933): 208–10.

initiate with white America, “internal debates” among blacks addressed the problematics as well as the promise of sport as a platform for social change. The discussions took place in many forums. Yet perhaps nowhere else were they conducted more extensively, or energetically, than on the campuses of traditionally African American colleges during the interwar era.

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In the years following the death of Booker T. Washington, a “New Negro” was said to have appeared on campus, provoking dramatic controversies over both the mission and methods of black higher education in the South. Significantly, many students and alumni, as well as a growing number of instructors and several college presidents, drew inspiration from the cultural renaissance associated with Harlem. Concerning liberal learning, they spoke the language of Du Bois and endeavored to use their talents in the full range of professional opportunities and intellectual pursuits. Many of them advanced the notion, moreover, of a thorough-going black “manhood,” which in the context of their essays and speeches bespoke self-confidence and the assertion of civil rights. “Manly” independence meant a resistance to the stifling conformity that for the new cohort characterized the atmosphere of many historically black institutions. It also encouraged an increasing militancy in the face of discriminatory public policies in the nation at large. One obvious correlative of such a mentality lay in the sanctioned aggressiveness, the images of heroism, the display of strength and energy, that infused competitive sports.

Against these voices for change, traditionalists mounted a resolute defense. Maintaining the visions of the founders of industrial training institutions and missionary schools, many educational authorities, both black and white, also subscribed to the conservative principles set forth by such funding agencies as the General Education Board and the Phelps-Stokes endowment. Thus, throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, numerous principals and presidents of the “old school”—supported by their boards of trustees or by lily-white state legislatures (or by both)—continued to impose a strict discipline on many student activities and to enforce what might be called a policy of “distance or deference” concerning race relations in the South.

Such considerations about the boundaries of the curriculum were closely related in the thoughts of many traditionally minded educators to the control of undergraduate conduct. The regulation of nearly every hour and virtually every facet of campus life at some institutions suggested a fear that students were incapable of self-governance, that they were somehow disposed to range out of control. Likewise, the academically modest, often outright regressive vocational programs at numerous schools—legacies of the Washingtonian creed—represented formidable restraints upon both

the preparation and aspiration of black students, regarding not only their immediate educational concerns but also their entire working lives.¹¹

Across the generations, the most crucial issue remained the claims of liberal learning over and against vocational training. Beyond that controversy, though, at many schools the relative influence accorded the extracurriculum, especially sports, provoked some of the most striking confrontations. While intercollegiate athletic competition was in many ways related to other campus activities, its symbolic significance often loomed larger than that of student government and campus journalism. And though the bonding within fraternities and sororities, like the rituals of dating and mating, occurred day-to-day, it was the drama of the big game that for many students converted the semester into a season.¹²

Sport stimulated campus spirit, its advocates declared. A game like football offered memorable examples of competence and vitality just as it represented one of the principal measures of institutional prestige, both within the African American community and beyond. As one undergraduate journalist declared in 1893, black collegians were justified in their anxiousness to play against other institutions, for "to excel in athletics as well as other things" would be to "raise the honor" of the school. Yet intercollegiate rivalries also raised numerous questions for students and educators, concerning the ways of gaining victory, the relationship between athletics and academics at poorly funded but ambitious institutions of learning, and ultimately concerning the proper purposes of "play" for black collegians.¹³

The "first facts" regarding black college athletics customarily pinpoint the date and location of the initial forays by varsity teams into extramural competition, whether it was the ball games played between the students of Hampton Institute and clubs from several towns in southeastern Virginia, or the contests between Howard and visiting squads from northern colleges. The 1892 football competition in North Caroli-

¹¹Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus*, offers the most detailed assessment of academic culture in the 1920s.

¹²See Monroe H. Little, "The Extra-Curricular Activities of Black College Students, 1868-1940," *Journal of Negro History* 65 (Spring 1980): 135-48; Randolph Edmonds, "Some Whys and Wherefores of College Dramatics," *Crisis* 37 (Mar. 1930): 92, 105.

¹³It was Charles W. Snyder, Jr., who wanted "to raise the honor" of his school, in the *Fisk Herald*, Jan. 1893, 5. I am indebted to Beth Howse, director of Special Collections at Fisk University, for making this and other materials available to me. Little, "The Extra-Curricular Activities of Black College Students." For sporting developments, see Henderson, "The Colored College Athlete"; and Chalk, *Black College Sport*, as well as institutional histories, such as Joe M. Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1980); Clarence A. Bacote, *The Story of Atlanta University: A Century of Service, 1865-1965* (Atlanta, Ga., 1969); Zella J. Black Patterson, *Langston University: A History* (Norman, Okla., 1979); Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University* (Wilberforce, Ohio, 1941).

na, matching Biddle (now Johnson C. Smith) and Livingstone, was the first black intercollegiate game on record for that sport. Within two years Howard and Lincoln as well as Tuskegee Institute and Atlanta University had commenced their rivalries, and by the turn of the century, Morgan College, Atlanta Baptist, and Virginia Union had also entered the intercollegiate athletic fray. With notable pride, Wiley College boasted in 1901 of the introduction of “ ‘football, as it is played at Yale and other Eastern colleges.’ ” Variations on the theme of precedence abounded. Though the inauguration of off-campus athletics was often in reality quite a modest affair, through memory and nostalgia it became a prominent part of the early histories of schools from Wilberforce in Ohio to Talladega in Alabama.¹⁴

The date and outcome of an athletic contest became a matter of record. Beyond such information, the first generation of black college athletes offered more vivid characterizations of the origins and development of black college sport, including the invention of traditions and reminiscences of triumph and travail. In adopting familiar team colors and nicknames, African American students in the New South hoped to give their schools a prominent place on the collegiate map. Thus, from the menagerie of ferocious mascots available to them, black collegians at Atlanta Baptist chose to become Tigers while at Livingstone they adopted the nickname Bears. Other schools distinguished themselves as the Lincoln Lions, Wiley Wildcats, and Howard Bisons, though the Tornados of Talladega and the Trojans of Virginia State departed from the dominant zoological theme. The early teams from Fisk were named after President Erastus Milo Cravath and played as the “Sons of Milo.” Happily, in later years they renamed themselves “Bulldogs.” And inevitably perhaps, numerous agricultural and industrial schools would be called “Aggies” on and off the field. To join a national intercollegiate culture, African American students created small distinctions between their institutions and selected rivals, but they also conformed to patterns of self-representation already well established.¹⁵

Significantly, too, black athletes took enormous pride in their efforts to start up and maintain their teams, innovation in the face of scarcity looming large in their recollections of spring and autumn sporting rituals. While the photographs of many of the early varsities portray neat uniforms and a noteworthy formality, they do not explain the many sacrifices athletes and institutions made during a season of competition. The members

¹⁴See Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, 100; Chalk, *Black College Sport*, 199–200; Heintze, *Private Black Colleges in Texas*, 171; Michael Hurd, *Black College Football, 1892–1992: One Hundred Years of History, Education, and Pride* (Virginia Beach, Va., 1993), 28; Ashe, *Hard Road to Glory*, 2: 100.

¹⁵See Hurd, *Black College Football*, 153–62; Richardson, *A History of Fisk*, 157.

of the first Livingstone squad chipped in to buy a single regulation football outfit from the Spalding Sporting Goods Company. From this model, the young women in the Sewing Department made patterns for the other uniforms. At Langston during the early years, athletes bought their own uniforms from the Sears and Roebuck catalog. Some players nailed small squares of old leather to their shoes, presumably for better traction on a dusty football field, though perhaps to repair damage after a rough season. And while a few relatively well-heeled students might have purchased shin protectors, nose guards, and mouthpieces, during the 1920s most athletes could not afford shoulder pads. “Head gear was thin, light, or nonexistent,” several former players remembered. For many schools equipment remained largely makeshift or make-do; even so, the teams generated considerable pride and excitement.¹⁶

Concerning the exhilaration and pageantry surrounding black college sport, it would be difficult at a distance to measure the jubilation on campus following an invitation to the Penn Relays, a vast—and racially mixed—track-and-field carnival, widely known during the 1920s as the “Negro Olympics.” From current affairs perhaps, one might get a sense of the college spirit (and spirits) that once animated the bonfire rally on the eve of a dramatic contest between archrivals Lincoln and Howard or between Tuskegee and Atlanta. The rituals black colleges shared with their predominantly white counterparts were significant in cultural terms; their differences were more important still. At least one rite attending football at historically African American institutions contrasted sharply with the autumn spectacles enacted on the campuses of northern and western colleges. This was the “rabblies.” A half-time pageant at several schools, the “rabblies” occurred when the grandstands emptied and students, clad in their finest, some carrying their own musical instruments, danced around the field, perhaps in conscious contrast to the precision marching bands that were the pride of many predominantly white universities. “The ending of the first half was the cue for ‘rabble’ exhibitions,” reported the *Howard University Record* about the game against Lincoln in 1921: “The rabblies of both schools pounced upon the field in spite of its mud-soaked condition and the continuous rain. The ‘Blue and White’ rabble, headed by its band, executed a wild snake dance while the Lincoln horde did its serpentine dance. The weather forbade society exhibitions . . . and kept the ladies in their seats, prohibiting the fur coat parade of last year.”¹⁷

¹⁶Patterson, *Langston University*, 172–75.

¹⁷*Howard University Record* 16 (Dec. 1921): 126. Concerning distinctive half-time activities in more recent years, see Michael Hurd and Stan C. Spence, “Halftime: The Band Be Kickin’!” in Hurd, *Black College Football*, 123–29.

As another periodical, the *Howard Alumni Sentinel*, observed, athletic rituals not only attested to the exuberance that infused the black athletic experience, they also offered a way to “keep alive” the “spirit of tradition” on the college scene. By other accounts as well, sport stood at the center of campus culture. According to the president of Florida A & M University, “No school in this day can expect to attract promising men or women that does not give organized athletics a foremost place. Where there are no athletics, it is very likely true that only deadheads are attracted. Young men and women of promise desire to be connected with an institution that has spirit and force.” Such ebullience also characterized the response of some faculty members to the sporting spectacle. In 1920, for instance, Professor Clara Standish of Talladega College wrote proudly to her friends that “ ‘our football team has won every game so far and is considered one of the finest in the South.’ ” Describing a crucial contest against Tuskegee, not merely as the triumph of skill over superior weight but also with a strong sense of academic status, Standish boasted “that it was ‘a decided victory for higher as compared with industrial education.’ ”¹⁸

Ultimately, as a response to prevailing notions of African American inferiority, organized athletics was a telling assertion of pride and accomplishment. Set against the backdrop of contrasting educational ideals, the phenomenon suggested not only the vitality of student culture on black campuses but also the gradual loosening of institutional restraints on undergraduate activity. For many contemporary commentators, athletics seemed to offer at least a limited means through which historically African American schools could become assimilated, on their own terms, to a national collegiate culture.

By the 1920s nearly every black college sponsored teams in football and baseball, as well as in basketball and track and field. Significantly, women students also participated in intramural athletic activities and traveled to intercollegiate basketball and track contests. During the depression decade, several runners such as Alice Coachman and Christine Petty gained national prominence, while a few southern schools assembled formidable teams, Tuskegee winning eleven out of twelve Amateur Athletic Union track championships between 1937 and 1948. The African American sporting community not only offered women more opportunities to compete but also accorded more prestige to their accomplishments than did predominantly white colleges. Yet alumni periodicals and the African

¹⁸*Howard Alumni Sentinel* 6 (Feb. 1923): 13–14. J. R. E. Lee quoted in Leedell W. Neyland, *The History of Florida A & M University* (Gainesville, Fla., 1963), 127; Standish quoted in Maxine D. Jones and Joe M. Richardson, *Talladega College: The First Century* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1990), 95.

American press abided by the prevailing gender ideology; it was principally the combined energy and expertise of male athletes that they extolled for representing institutional honor and carrying the cause of the race. Whether it was in the person of such stars as Francis Alfred "Jazz" Byrd and Harry "Wu Fang" Ward or the collective achievement of black Olympians, the male image held a central place in the African American athletic ideal.¹⁹

In more strictly organizational terms, the black colleges sought to emulate the most successful white intercollegiate programs at institutions such as the University of Virginia or distant Yale. Most schools hired coaches and trainers, at least on a part-time basis. An increasing number of colleges joined the athletic conferences devised to organize sporting affairs. And they acknowledged—in one form or another—the existence of rules and standards governing amateur competition. Established in 1912, the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) enlisted the majority of traditionally black institutions in the upper South. During the next two decades, the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association, the South-Atlantic Intercollegiate Athletic Association, and the Southwestern Athletic Conference, were formed to regulate black sport, though often they were much more loosely organized than the CIAA. These conferences disseminated materials which had originated with the Amateur Athletic Union and the National Collegiate Athletic Association, although many individual cases fell outside the broad principles defining "pure and simple" amateurism, a class-based Victorian construct if ever there was one. Meetings were held and rules passed, but the foremost agencies of regulation often seemed ineffective. This only served to sharpen the debate over sports, educational mission, and the progress of the race.²⁰

Belying the assumptions about sportsmanship that lay at the foundation of the athletic creed and revealing the weakness of the early governing organizations, problems concerning perceived corruption and inadequate control began to occur more frequently in the 1920s. What had long been keen competition on the field escalated during the interwar years into conduct that, for some commentators, threatened to tarnish the collegiate image they had endeavored so strenuously to create. And it

¹⁹On the relation of gender and sport in the black community, see Linda Williams, "An Analysis of American Sportswomen in Two Negro Newspapers: The *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1924–1948, and the *Chicago Defender*, 1932–1948" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1987); and Susan K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (New York, 1994), 110–39.

²⁰See Ira F. Lewis, "Intercollegiate Track Meet to Be Held at Howard on May 14," *Competitor* 3 (May 1921): 40, 42; Charles H. Williams, "Twenty Years Work of the C.I.A.A.," *Southern Workman* 61 (Feb. 1932): 65–76; *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 16 Apr. 1932; Henderson, *The Negro in Sports*, 288–301; Chalk, *Black College Sport*.

was owing to the belief that intercollegiate sporting competition had suddenly lurched out of control that the subject of athletics began to play into larger controversies concerning student autonomy, presidential authority, and the aims of black education.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the athletic programs of numerous black colleges came under criticism for their unfair recruiting practices and indifference to academic standards of eligibility, as well as for the subsidization of their best passers, pitchers, and runners. Accusations about violations of rules filled the mails traveling from one campus to another. Such allegations also flowed from the pages of *Crisis*, where W. E. B. Du Bois, and his protégé, George Streater, periodically railed against a long litany of abuses in sports, breaches of the spirit if not always the letter of the “laws” then defining amateurism. Claflin College admitted athletes without reviewing their transcripts, Streater reported in one lengthy article, while South Carolina State College fielded several athletes who had seen considerable action around Orangeburg during the preceding eight years and several more who had played collegiate ball elsewhere. The indictment ran to several fact-filled pages, and Streater even ranked black colleges according to the extensiveness of their athletic excesses.²¹

One school enrolled a man in a music class for an hour each week so he could compete on the football team, Streater asserted. Other colleges used players from the preparatory department or the theological seminary to fill out their squads. Fisk’s most prominent football player, “Jumping” Joe Wiggins, had one year’s experience at Virginia State, then two years’ more at Atlanta University before lending his talents to the Nashville institution for three years of competition. During the mid-twenties Archie Lewis distinguished himself on the gridiron for John Carroll University, a Jesuit school in Cleveland, Ohio, then contributed his services for four years more to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. The success of Wilberforce on the gridiron, Streater concluded, was “less a tribute to the skill of the coaches than to the experience of the players.” The list of infractions seemed endless, highlighted by editorial charges that athletic officials at many schools had abandoned their broader responsibilities and succumbed to the demand for victory at any cost.²²

For the most part, critics and reformers ignored the exploitation of athletic labor, concentrating mainly on the issue of unfair competition. In

²¹George Streater, “Football in Negro Colleges,” 129–30, 141. A list of “bad” offenders included Lincoln (Pa.), Wilberforce, South Carolina State, Allen University, Claflin, and Morris Brown. “Medium, in need of further reform,” were Fisk, West Virginia State, Knoxville, and Kentucky State. Streater ranked Hampton, Howard, Morehouse, Wiley, and Tuskegee as good.

²²Streater, “Football in Negro Colleges,” 129–30, 141.

1929 Frank A. Young of the Chicago *Defender* refused to pick an All-America team because he considered it unfair to compare the playing ability of performers who had competed for seven or eight years with those who had participated for only two or three. Tuskegee had not lost a game in years, Du Bois noted in 1930. "I ask, why should she?" he wondered. "Has she not kept the same team practically intact for six or seven years? The name [Benjamin Franklin] Stevenson has appeared in Tuskegee's lineup for no less than six years. Unless there is a radical change of policy, it will appear next year." Numerous practices of this sort not only called into question the sportsmanship of some schools, Du Bois contended; such conduct also suggested the need for substantial reform. A vital student culture was laudable, but athletic scandals indicated too great an emphasis on matters not related to the academic purposes of higher education. For many African American leaders, "self-government" had long been an issue of great concern, and they strove to dispel prevailing images regarding poorly formed habits and values among black youth. Simply stated, the reputation of centers of learning needed to be protected.²³

Significantly, both the long list of schools violating athletic rules and the stated concern about academic status were not unique to black higher education. In fact, Streator's indictment of such institutions as Lincoln, Wilberforce, and South Carolina State paralleled reports in the mainstream press about the recruiting practices of the University of Pittsburgh, for instance, or the ways athletes at the University of Southern California were maintained by local alumni and civic boosters. Throughout the twenties, while a number of sportswriters documented instances of illegal "proselytism" and subsidization at predominantly white colleges and universities, educational authorities and cultural commentators inveighed against the increasing commercialization and professionalization of college sport. What was occurring on the black college scene, then, was part of a much larger pattern, and the specific recommendations advanced by African American reformers of sport would have been familiar to their counterparts in the white collegiate establishment.²⁴

²³Richardson, *A History of Fisk*, 158; Streator, "Negro Football Standards," 85–86; Du Bois, "Athletics in Negro Colleges," 209. Stevenson, perhaps the greatest black college football player of his era, played for eight seasons in all. See Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory*, 2: 101.

²⁴See, for instance, Upton Sinclair, *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Education*, 4 vols. (Pasadena, Calif., 1923); and more importantly, Bulletin no. 23 of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: Howard J. Savage, with Harold W. Bentley, John T. McGovern, and Dean F. Smiley, *American College Athletics* (New York, 1929). This was an exhaustive, thoroughly documented, survey of the athletic practices of more than one hundred (white) institutions of higher education. See also John R. Tunis, *Sport\$: Heroics and Hysterics* (New York, 1928); and Reed Harris, *King Football: The Vulgarization of*

The policies advocated by Du Bois and Streator, for instance, included one rule limiting athletic eligibility to three years and another that required an athlete to sit out one year of competition after changing schools. According to this plan of action, all black colleges should be bound by common standards governing the recruitment of high school athletes and the use of students not regularly enrolled in the collegiate program. Athletes would not be allowed to participate on professional teams during the off-season; likewise, it would be illegal for schools to remunerate players for their services. Beyond these stipulations, Streator argued for increased faculty control of sports, periodic meetings among deans and registrars to address athletic problems, and a more forceful national body to coordinate, ultimately to supervise, the activities of the respective regional conferences.²⁵

Cast largely within the framework of progressive reform—emphasizing high morals and effective administration—both the indictments and the remedies that emanated from *Crisis* journalism between 1930 and 1932 closely resembled the charges and programs set forth in the famous Carnegie Report of 1929, the most detailed critique of (white) college sport ever assembled. Within this context, the motives of many reformers seemed clear: “New Negroes” were supposed to play the same games in the same manner as the athletes at the most upright institutions found in the Northeast or Midwest. As Du Bois asserted: “Now that Negro colleges are being admitted to the associations of standard colleges, and even now are debating with these colleges and universities, it is even possible that some Negro college will play games with the members of the ‘Big Ten’ or some other Carnegie-investigated groups. I wonder if we will have the nerve to say that ‘Chicago exhibited great racial prejudice in refusing to play unless Fisk benched Brown, her mainstay in the backfield for the last ten years?’ ”²⁶

The promulgation of numerous rules and regulations constituted one dimension of the larger discussion concerning the prominence—some would have said the overexposure—of sports at black colleges. There remained, as well, other voices in the dialogue, maintaining a deep and widespread pride in the accomplishments of African American athletes and continuing to assert that sporting competition admirably projected the

the American College (New York, 1932). A recent appraisal of the issue is John R. Thelin, *Games Colleges Play: Scandal and Reform in Intercollegiate Athletics* (Baltimore, Md., 1994), 13–37.

²⁵Streator, “Negro Football Standards,” 85–86; “Football in Negro Colleges,” 129–30.

²⁶Du Bois, “Athletics in Negro Colleges,” 210. Howard had already played football against Cooper Union of New York City and baseball against Columbia University. Louis L. Wilson, “A New Athletic Policy at Howard University,” *Howard Alumnus* 3 (15 Jan. 1925): 60–61.

image of black manhood. Ostensibly, the debate conformed to the “classic” outlines of generational conflict, pitting student demands for more expansive means of self-expression and autonomy within the extracurriculum—in alliance with those who advocated a new model of liberal learning—against the claims of an old-guard, insistent on the tight control of the entire educational enterprise—identified with a very circumscribed curriculum.

Yet as the concerns of Du Bois suggest, the controversy over the boundaries of student culture actually cut across rival notions of academic mission. At several institutions, for instance, educational innovators were intent on transforming their schools into universities of the first rank; at the same time, they were notable for their extreme hostility to sports as distractions from greater goals. It was the library and laboratory, not the playing field, that should feature the highest demonstrations of African American potential, some college presidents asserted through both word and deed. On the other hand, many “new” students and alumni showed less support for curricular innovation and educational excellence than they did for the development of sports as a measure of institutional pride. In protesting the edicts that would weaken or eliminate the football team, they sought to challenge the traditional structure of authority because it had become so demoralizing. But they also showed considerable tolerance of the athletic scandals that threatened the academic reputation of their schools.

Ultimately, some notably progressive black commentators sided with heavy-handed college leaders on behalf of strong academic programs as the basis for racial uplift, while many students and their supporters saw in the expansion of sport one of the best means of cultivating their own sense of race pride. In light of such crossings of lines, the familiar dichotomy setting apart Washingtonians and the “New Negro” needs to be revised in order to explain how the curriculum and extracurriculum often stood as rivals within the broad campaign for improving race relations. In significant ways, the controversies at two of the most prominent institutions of black education illustrate the dynamics of these debates as well as the complexity of the relationship between muscular impulses and racial progress.

The situation at Fisk University during the first part of the 1920s suggests that strong personalities as well as competing ideals played a large part in the debate over the extracurriculum. Fayette Avery McKenzie, who had been the president of the school since 1915, stood among several other educators of the era who seemed to combine Washingtonian means to promote institutional authority with the ideals of Du Bois concerning the full development of the academic realm. “McKenzie’s motto was ‘Let us dare to be a university.’ ” Accordingly, he endeavored to improve academic standards as well as to expand the curriculum, raising substantial sums from the General Education Board and Carnegie Corporation in

order to carry out his plans. Yet at the same time, his rule on campus was generally characterized as tyrannical, a program “ ‘of petty authority in an aggravated form’ ” which set off a campus revolt. McKenzie elaborated a strict code of discipline, regulating dress and conversation as well as curtailing those undergraduate activities that were not already prohibited, such as student government and campus journalism. Additionally, he discontinued intercollegiate baseball and track, and as students complained, he presided over “the decline of football to the point where Fisk had recently fallen to Tuskegee by a score of sixty-seven to zero.”²⁷

Responding to what he perceived to be athletic “over-emphasis,” the bogey haunting many educators, McKenzie created problems of morale so extensive that they overwhelmed his academic ambitions and his program of reform for Fisk. In several dramatic presentations, Du Bois entered the fray on behalf of the students, the controversy went public, extending far beyond the Nashville community, and McKenzie was eventually persuaded to resign. What many envisioned as an ideal balance between the offerings found in the course catalog and the extracurriculum had not been struck at Fisk. Nor would it be in subsequent years, when athletic preeminence was followed by revelations of impropriety, and the rancorous contest between athletics and academics was rejoined.²⁸

The troubled atmosphere at Fisk had a counterpart in the sour relations between two forceful presidents of Howard University and many of their students. Resembling the case involving McKenzie, the hostilities on the hilltop in the District of Columbia initially centered on a white college president with an authoritarian disposition and the growing militance of a black academic community widely regarded as “the capstone of Negro education.” During the early 1920s, J. Stanley Durkee drove Howard toward Class-A accreditation for an increasing number of the college divisions as well as the professional schools, a formal status allowing the school to compare itself to the most prominent institutions in the “Middle States” region, including segregated Georgetown, George Washington, and American universities in the District of Columbia, as well as the Maryland Agricultural College—significantly, not until 1920 renamed the University of Maryland—just a few miles away. In the process, however, Durkee alienated many African American educators at the university and ran afoul of the alumni as well as many undergraduates. There were many dimensions to the confrontation at Howard. The racial com-

²⁷Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus*, 29–69; Abigail Jackson to Du Bois, 20 Jan. 1925, cited in *ibid.*, 45; Richardson, *A History of Fisk University*, 157–58; Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 265–70.

²⁸See *Washington American*, 25 Apr. 1925; *Chicago Whip*, 27 Feb. 1926. Concerning the next round of debates, see Du Bois, “Athletics in Negro Colleges,” 209–10.

position of the board of trustees and the relative power of the president were crucial issues. So too was Durkee's condescending attitude toward the faculty, as strong-willed as it was in many ways eminent.²⁹

But debates concerning the role of athletics also contributed to the discord on campus. A controversy over the eligibility of a football player named Robert Miller, who had transferred from Lincoln University, occurred during the 1924 season and extended into the first months of 1925, late on Durkee's watch. It involved strained relations with other institutions and with the governing athletic association, but mainly it focused attention on the rivalry between athletics and academics at Howard. The immediate outcome was the withdrawal of Howard from the CIAA. But the Miller imbroglio actually foreshadowed a reevaluation of the mission of the most prominent black university in the nation. Combined with numerous other actions that outraged the black community, the controversy over sports helped forge an alliance that challenged the entire educational administration. Durkee did not weather the storm; he was forced to resign in 1926. To a significant extent, though, his successor would reap the athletic whirlwind.³⁰

In numerous respects, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, the first black president of Howard, took over where his predecessor left off, striving to achieve educational excellence with missionary zeal, imposing his program on students and teachers who, for their part, had a strong sense of their own contributions to Howard's reputation. Not simply a legacy of the Durkee years, but also a matter of policy early in his own administration, sports became a core issue. Soon after Johnson's inauguration, the crisis over athletics polarized the campus and provoked an enormous outpouring of resentment toward those who would scuttle successful football teams in order to consolidate academic reputation. In the first instance, Johnson pursued a broad-based program of exercise and physical activity. John H. Burr had been appointed dean of physical education for men during the Durkee years, but he won Johnson's support as well. Owing to his experience in the YMCA movement and his belief in "Athletics for

²⁹For Howard under Durkee, see Emmett J. Scott, "The 'New Howard,'" *Competitor* 1 (Jan. 1920): 10–11; E. C. Williams, "Howard University," *Crisis* 23 (Feb. 1922): 157, 162; Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus*, 70–136. See also, Walter Dyson, *Howard University: The Capstone of Negro Education: A History, 1867–1940* (Washington, D.C., 1941), 396–98; Rayford Whittingham Logan, *Howard University: The First One Hundred Years, 1867–1967* (New York, 1968), 187–246. I am indebted to Hylan Lewis, a former professor of sociology at Howard, for pointing out (with a certain flourish) the date of the transformation of the University of Maryland.

³⁰For the Miller case, see Edward P. Davis, "Howard and the C.I.A.A.," *Howard Alumnus* 3 (15 Jan. 1925): 48–49, 52, 59; *Howard Alumnus* 4 (15 May 1925): 139–40; Chalk, *Black College Sport*, 236–37.

All,” he endeavored to reorient Howard sporting programs toward the gymnasium and the intramural playing fields. Johnson, also attached to the YMCA ideal, subscribed to this conception of physical training and competition, and though once a varsity athlete himself, he sought to diminish the influence of intercollegiate sports on college life.³¹

Arguing that both expense and equity—an athletic budget deficit of \$21,000 and the need to help students struggling economically—required the reduction of sports programs, in 1927 Johnson abolished athletic scholarships, the training table, and compensation for room and board. The immediate consequence was a strike—though a short-lived one—on the part of the football squad. To the consternation of fans, on campus and beyond, Johnson’s plans meant a diminished athletic program. In ensuing years, Howard teams won “moral victories” on gridiron and diamond, according to one editorialist, but few real ones. And after another brief period of expansion and another round of cuts, in 1936 Howard athletes went on strike again, with the overwhelming support of the student body, but without much success against the entrenched academic authorities.³²

As Howard’s athletic fortunes fell, several African American leaders emerged to defend Johnson’s ideals and program. One of them was Du Bois, who in this case defended an imperious administrator, lauding Johnson’s “attempt to purge the lists at Howard of those students who were not maintaining scholastic efficiency.” Along the same lines, Du Bois castigated the “rabid sports lovers of the country” for subverting the proper purposes of the academy. Within a wide-ranging indictment of campus culture run amok, which he delivered at the Howard commencement of 1930, Du Bois emphasized the ill effects of athletic excess: “The average Negro undergraduate has swallowed hook, line and sinker, the dead bait of the white undergraduate, who, born in an industrial machine, does not have to think, and does not think. Our college man today, is, on the average, a man untouched by real culture. He deliberately surrenders to selfish and even silly ideals, swarming into semi-professional

³¹On Howard in the Johnson years, see Dyson, *Howard University*, 66, 398–401, 433–38; Logan, *Howard University*, 247–406. Interesting perspectives can be found in Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia, 1983); Kenneth Manning, *Black Apollo of Science: The Life of Ernest Everett Just* (New York, 1983), 208–10; Kenneth R. Janken, *Rayford W. Logan and the Dilemma of the African-American Intellectual* (Amherst, Mass., 1993), 202–14. Robert Cohen nicely captures the many dimensions of Johnson in *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Mass Student Movement, 1929–1941* (New York, 1993), 219, 395 n. 104.

³²On athletic matters, see Wilson, “A New Athletic Policy,” 60–61. On the strikes, see Howard University *Hilltop*, 18 Oct. 1927; Chalk, *Black College Sport*, 245–48.

athletics and Greek letter societies, and affecting to despise scholarship and the hard grind of study and research."³³

The debate had two sides, of course, both keen to the ways in which American society worked and played. For the defenders of sport, it was desirable if not imperative that Howard excel in a variety of fields to demonstrate that it was a full-fledged educational institution. Yet this purportedly more expansive notion of the collegiate enterprise turned out to be just as disparaging of strict academics as the followers of Johnson and Du Bois could be about the overemphasis of athletics. According to one of the administration's critics, it seemed that the great aim of the university was to make "literary geniuses, philosophers, and Phi Beta Kappa men out of football players." Athletics was being destroyed at Howard, many students complained, because no one was encouraging players "in a material way" comparable to the manner in which other colleges subsidized sports, or as some might have stated, comparable to the means used to improve the Howard law school or biology department.³⁴

Beyond the campus setting, black commentators assessed the relationship between the curriculum and the most notable aspect of student culture. The New York *Amsterdam News* editorialized in 1929 that "the public expects the best in everything from Howard; the best scholarship, the best sportsmanship, and the best athletic competitions." But as a writer for the same newspaper suggested eleven years later, for many African Americans it was sports that mattered most. After Lincoln trounced Howard by a score of 63–0, the journalist lamented that "mediocrity in football or any other form of intercollegiate competition doesn't help the school's prestige." Howard officials would be well advised, he continued, "either get a football team or do like the University of Chicago, 'throw in the sponge.'" The circumstances notwithstanding, such a comparison of academic institutions doubtless would have been praised by Du Bois, just as it might have pleased Johnson, who lasted as president of Howard until 1960, held in awe by many in the community but still largely unliked.³⁵

The controversy over the value of sport in enhancing the prestige of an institution, or in improving race relations, would continue long past

³³Du Bois, "Education and Work," in *The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Julius Lester (New York, 1971) 1: 563. See also Edward P. Davis, "The Function of a Board of Athletic Control," *Howard Alumnus* 5 (Feb. 1927): 115.

³⁴Howard *Hilltop*, 7 and 14 Nov. 1927. See also the clippings, reports, and other materials in Box 25, Ralph Bunche Papers, Manuscripts Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City.

³⁵New York *Amsterdam News* for both 1929 and 1940, quoted in Chalk, *Black College Sport*, 275–76. See also, Henderson, "Sports," *Messenger* 8 (May 1926): 149, and 8 (Aug. 1926): 247; idem, *The Negro in Sports*, 356–59.

the end of Johnson's tenure at Howard or the departure of W. E. B. Du Bois from the offices of *Crisis*. Arguments on behalf of athletics as an emblem of pride and an avenue of opportunity have largely prevailed. Such endorsements appear on the half-time television commercials sponsored by the NCAA; they inform the stories of success and surpassing that fill the daily sports pages; they often inspire the rhetoric of prominent political figures. Yet against such claims, many commentators have voiced their misgivings about the utility of sport in shaping social change or about the concentration on athletics to the neglect of other demonstrations of prowess and pride.

Those who addressed the issue during the interwar period were as eloquent as any who came after. But of all the critical observations on sport, perhaps the most acute expression of doubt about athletic ideals and practices occurred in a verse published in *Crisis* in 1928 by a young African American scholar, whose lines, both earnest and sardonic, were addressed to "The Second Generation" at historically black colleges:

You spend your winters
Juggling basket-balls
And women.
You won't work,
You won't study,
You won't marry;

But you have four "letters,"
And a fraternity pin.

College education
Of a hundred like you every year
Will bring the race along rapidly.³⁶

In response to the various pronouncements about sport, "the universal language," the poem by Allison Davis—who in 1942 became the first African American professor hired by a predominantly white university—highlighted the problems of a student culture not directed outward to larger social concerns. It implied, from an academic's point of view, what higher ideals black collegians ought to strive for. And it suggested a more profound apprehension that what African Americans have succeeded in doing with their bodies has not communicated, for the dominant culture, the entire range of black aspiration and capability.

Cast within the context of the development of African American higher education and in terms of black manhood, the ideal of "muscular assimilationism" has become a part of a broad-based cultural conversa-

³⁶Allison Davis, "The Second Generation: College Athlete," *Crisis* 35 (Mar. 1928): 87.

tion about equality and opportunity in America. For many black leaders, sports have afforded a source of self-expression and fostered self-esteem. Athletics have called attention to youth and energy, consequently directing thought and imagination toward the future, presumably a better future. Even before the turn of the century, a hopeful writer for the Fisk University *Herald* had declared, "We do not agree with Pindar, who said, 'No man is great who is not great with his hands and feet'; but we do believe that not only the brain but also hands and feet ought to be cultivated. For well has it been said that only strong arms can make men and nations free."³⁷

But for those white Americans who have wished to limit its significance, athletics could also be interpreted as yet another form of physical labor, simply a matter of sweat and muscle. In many ways, the dominant culture has historically conceded black strength and endurance; from the perspective not only of the cultural critic, but also of the athlete on the field, the equation of playing fields and cotton fields is not difficult to discern. What amounted to the inversion of the athletic creed, which long had linked the strong body to idealized notions of character and courage, proceeded in racist terms from the metaphor of servitude. Mere brawn could be abstracted from the traits of discipline, self-sacrifice, and other long-lauded values, many sportswriters and athletic officials contended. Critically, it was precisely at the time when black athletes had begun to register more victories in interracial competition—winning boxing championships and Olympic gold medals—that such formulations achieved a wider currency among white commentators.

Thus by the 1920s and 1930s, prevailing generalizations about black athletic achievement, whether predicated on custom or the claims of pseudoscience, departed from the notion of the acculturating dimension of the playing fields and emphasized "instinct," "natural ability," the legacies of a "primitive" existence in Africa. Such thinking became even more expansive in its assertions that superior physicality indicated a lack of intelligence and creativity or somehow compensated for their absence. Fifty years after the Fisk undergraduate declared his belief in the value of sports "to make men and nations free" and less than two decades following the statement of faith by the Howard University student that athletics constituted "a universal language," a white track coach could explain African American success in sports with references that thoroughly undermined the ideal of "muscular assimilationism." "It was not long ago," Dean Cromwell casually averred in 1941, "that his [the black athlete's] ability to sprint and jump was a life-and-death matter to him in the jungle. His

³⁷Fisk *Herald*, Nov. 1894.

muscles are pliable, and his easy-going disposition is a valuable aid to the mental and physical relaxation that a runner and jumper must have.”³⁸

During the interwar years some African Americans challenged the hypocrisy involved in altering the dialogue concerning athletics achievement, the cultivation of character, and racial progress.³⁹ The paradox would be seized upon in later years by black activists, Harry Edwards foremost among them, as well as by cultural historians sometimes theoretically bent, who have studied the relationship of the body to power in modern society. Their considerations delineate the contours of social control and the subtleties of hegemony; they also emphasize the linkages among the categories of race, gender, and class, especially as they have been deployed in elaborate systems of subordination.⁴⁰

Ultimately, the best means of achieving “racial reconciliation” or overcoming structures of oppression continue to be debated. But in the aftermath of statements by prominent white sports figures in recent years about how black athletic achievement does not translate into the “necessities” of leadership and command, or in light of a long network television report in which success in sport by African Americans was largely portrayed, not in terms of cultural values and social practices, but as an issue once again requiring “scientific” investigation, there is substantial reason to

³⁸Dean Cromwell and Al Wesson, *Championship Techniques in Track and Field* (New York, 1941), 6. See also “Black Football Is Beautiful,” in John McCallum and Charles H. Pearson, *College Football USA, 1869–1973: Official Book of the National Football Foundation* (New York, 1973), 231; Martin Kane, “An Assessment of ‘Black Is Best,’” *Sports Illustrated*, 18 Jan. 1971, 72–83. On scientific racism generally, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981); Kenneth M. Ludmerer, “American Geneticists and the Eugenics Movement, 1905–1935,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 2 (Fall 1969): 337–62; Manning, *Black Apollo of Science*, 49–50; Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (New York, 1992).

³⁹For criticism of the various explanations among whites that emphasized distinctive anatomical and physiological advantages, see the *Peoria Transcript*, 9 July 1933; Henderson, “The Negro Athlete and Race Prejudice,” 79; W. Montague Cobb, “Race and Runners,” *Journal of Health and Physical Education* 7 (Jan. 1936): 3–6. The best historical assessment of the issue is David K. Wiggins, “‘Great Speed but Little Stamina’: The Historical Debate over Black Athletic Superiority,” *Journal of Sport History* 16 (Summer 1989): 158–85. See also Gary A. Saites, “The Myth of Black Sports Supremacy,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21 (June 1991): 480–87.

⁴⁰Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York, 1969); and idem, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, Ill., 1973). See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977), 135–69; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., “Race,” *Writing, and Difference* (Chicago, 1986), 185–261; John M. Hoberman, *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (New York, 1992), 33–61.

be skeptical about the efficacy of sport to overcome the formidable prejudices which continue to clutter the social landscape.⁴¹

⁴¹Philip M. Hoose, *Necessities: Racial Barriers in American Sports* (New York, 1989). The NBC News documentary, a “Brokaw Report” on “Black Athletes—Fact and Fiction” was aired on 25 Apr. 1989. For impressive assessments of this program, see Laurel R. Davis, “The Articulation of Difference: White Preoccupation with the Question of Racially Linked Genetic Differences among Athletes,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7 (June 1990): 179–87; John Hoberman, “‘Black Athletes—Fact and Fiction’: A Racist Documentary?” lecture presented at the convention of the American Psychological Association, 14 Aug. 1990. I am indebted to Professor Hoberman for sharing this paper with me.