

# **Farewell to Sport: The Decline of the African American Athlete During the Age of the Collegiate Arms Race and Globalization**

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Perhaps no one is better positioned than Professor Edwards to provide a critical assessment of the interconnection among sport, race and American culture. The man who organized the proposed boycott of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City and has served for years as the conscience for an institution that has not always lived up to its professed ideals of fair play and equality, Professor Edwards has provided important insights into the racial realities of American sport through his many presentations, interviews, public pronouncements, articles, and such books as *Black Students* (1970), *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969), *The Struggle that Must Be: An Autobiography* (1980), and *Sociology of Sport* (1973).

In this plenary address Edwards furnishes an assessment of the status of African American athletes during the new age of globalization and current economic instability inflicting intercollegiate sport. Careful to put the topic in its proper historical context, Professor Edwards makes clear that the reintegration of sport in post-World War II America was motivated more by business and politics than brotherhood and that the selective one-way nature of the process has led to a plantation system in which whites control sport while African Americans are relegated to the less powerful position of athlete. The selective and one-way rather than two-way and structural process of reintegration successfully put an end to all black sports institutions while at once funneling a disproportionate number of African American male athletes into basketball and football and their female counterparts into basketball and track and field. Coinciding with the development of a plantation system in sport has been the outmigration of the more affluent members of the African American community that has led to the deepening material deterioration and resultant desperation and hopelessness of that community. No one has been more affected by this deterioration than young African American males who have increasingly been mired in poverty, limited in their access to a quality education, overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and with little hope of career success beyond that of dreaming of becoming a rap artist or professional athlete. Unfortunately, the chances of becoming an athlete at the highest level is severely limited and becoming increasingly so, especially now with more potentially great

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athletes in jail combined with the negative effects of the collegiate arms race and expanding talent pool resulting from globalization. African Americans in basketball and even football face increasing challenges for limited numbers of playing spots from highly skilled and well-trained athletes from foreign climes.

In all, Professor Edwards provides a far-ranging assessment of the status of African American athletes that, is nicely grounded in the literature, very interesting, and fearless in its approach. Although questioning whether a “golden age of black sports participation” ever existed and yearning for more information on African American women athletes, I am struck once again by Professor Edwards’ skill at writing passionately about an institution he obviously loves while at the same time pointing out the “racial, cultural, and social issues that strain and strangle it” (Lewis, 2010, p. xxiii). I also agree with much of Professor Edward’s analysis and interpretations and conclusions. Of all the issues raised by Professor Edwards in his presentation, it is the development of a plantation system in sport that I find most intriguing and thought provoking. No one can come away from his presentation believing that sport has been a site for steady racial progress or is immune from the injustice and inequality that characterizes the larger American society.

It would be inappropriate to wax too nostalgic about sport behind segregated walls, but it is true that the separate teams, events, and organizations established during the era of racial segregation were extraordinarily important for a variety of reasons to members of the African American community. The Interscholastic Athletic Association (ISAA), Negro National Baseball League, East-West All-Star Baseball Game, Howard and Lincoln Thanksgiving Day Football classic, United Golfers Association, United Tennis Association, Philadelphia Tribune girls basketball team, Tennessee State Tigerbelles track and field team and a host of other parallel teams, events and organizations afforded African Americans an opportunity to exhibit skills of self-organization and strengthen feelings of connectedness and community. They provided opportunities to exhibit great athletic skills as well as to maintain a much-needed sense of solidarity in a world that denied them freedom of choice and relegated them to second-class citizenship based on race. These teams, events, and organizations were also enormously important from a symbolic standpoint, were meant to break down the prevailing opinions of the black man’s inferiority, and had an uplifting effect on the entire African American community. The teams, leagues and organizations associated with segregated high schools and historically black colleges and universities, moreover, were designed to build moral fiber and develop the physical well-being of its participants while also serving as a preparation for life (Ashe, 1988; Bruce, 1985; Chalk, 1976; Grundy, 2001; Henderson, 1939, 1949; Lanctot, 2004; Lomax, 2003; Miller, 1995; Ruck, 1987; Snyder 2003; Wiggins, 1997). As Nelson George notes in *Elevating the Game* (1992), basketball in segregated black high schools in the first half of the twentieth century was initially a tool to help foster pride, draw attention to the overall educational mission of the black community, and a way to give under-privileged but athletically gifted African American youth a chance at a college education. In essence, basketball as originally conceived of by African Americans, was about developing race leaders and not just promoting stars, about developing character and not just promoting professional athletics, and about developing model citizens and not just promoting the singular pursuit of professional sports contracts (Wiggins, 2010).

This conception of sport would change dramatically with the advent of integration in post World War II America. As Professor Edwards makes clear the method rather than mere fact of integration in both sport and the larger American society has had several consequences for African American athletes and the black community more generally. For instance, de facto segregation, the result of systematic efforts to undermine the spirit of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the nation's lack of commitment to civil rights, the exit of talented individuals and valuable resources from the black community, and the more conservative nature of the Supreme Court, have all forced many African Americans, both in the North and the South, to compete in underfunded and inferior public schools that stress athletics much to the detriment of academics (Ogletree, 2004; Patterson, 2001).

This fact has had some different ramifications for African American women and men athletes. African American women athletes, who do not have as large a carrot of professional sport dangling in front of them as do their male counterparts, represent less than five percent of high school athletes and less than ten percent of college athletes. Those African American women who do find their way into sport are disproportionately represented in basketball and track and field and underrepresented in, as sport historian and legal scholar Sarah Fields' terms, the country club sports such as tennis, soccer, crew, and lacrosse. Although graduating from college at a higher rate than African American women in the general student body, it is indeed apparent that Title IX has done little to cure racial inequity in sport (Fields, 2008).

African American male athletes are disproportionately represented in football and basketball, the two sports, according to sociologists Tamela and David Eitle and other academicians, that are less likely to be associated with academic achievement (Eitle & Eitle, 2002). Although some of them have been able to satisfy the academic standards established by the NCAA, earn scholarships to compete in college sport, and graduate at a higher rate than the black male population in the general student body, a large majority are left to recall their glory days in high school, unable to meet minimum academic requirements and dreaming of what might have been. Examples of this sport participation pattern among African American male athletes have been poignantly told in such popular books as Michael Sokolove's *The Ticket Out* (2004) and Darcy Frey's *The Last Shot* (1994) and perhaps most famously by Steve James in his documentary *Hoop Dreams* (hooks, 1995).

In spite of the continued warnings over the years by Professor Edwards, Henry Louis Gates (1991), Arthur Ashe (1993), Earl Graves (1979), and other prominent individuals regarding the danger of African American athletes viewing their bodies as their only resume and that individual success in sport is not a satisfactory solution to the problem of discrimination, the consolidation of power in a white elite has convinced lower class African Americans in particular, and others lacking power and available resources, that permanent social change is possible and that participation in sport and other forms of entertainment will result in both short and long term benefits. It is why the warnings about the over dependence on sport are not heard by many economically challenged African American families who are not usually making a choice between professional athletics or education but rather a choice among professional athletics or being a blue-collar worker or living a life in the underworld. It is why high school athletes from lower economic classes, if they are able to overcome their inferior schooling and satisfy NCAA guidelines,

seemingly select a college based on the athletic rather than academic reputation of the institution in which they are being recruited. If they do graduate it does not guarantee that education has taken place as evidenced by the famous case of Creighton University basketball player Kevin Ross who was awarded his degree without knowing how to read (Smith, 2011). These examples do not even take into account those athletes whose quest for stardom first took them to Rise Academy in Philadelphia; Genesis One Christian Academy in Mendenhall, Mississippi; Eldon Academy in Michigan; and other bogus private high schools first uncovered by the *New York Times*' Pete Thamel (Thamel, 2006).

If the plight of these athletes were to be improved it would be wise to take seriously Professor Edward's admonition that "we must not make the mistake of looking at developments and realities at the interface of race, sport and education through obsolete perspectives and analytical paradigms." A historical truism is to understand that "often the wisdom of one era is the foolishness of another." It also seems wise to take seriously Professor Edwards' warning regarding the negative effects of globalization and the collegiate athletic arms race, although some African Americans have found athletic success in foreign lands at the professional level and those sports targeted for elimination on our nation's campuses are the ones with a limited number of African American participants to begin with. It seems wise, moreover, to take seriously Professor Edward's acknowledgment of black culpability while at once being cognizant of continued white privilege and the lasting effects of integration. The increased integration in post World War II America has, in the words of *New York Times* sportswriter Bill Rhoden, "weakened the collective resolve of African Americans and spawned a mentality of using blackness as a way to get a piece of the pie without necessarily feeling any reciprocal responsibility to sustain black institutions (Rhoden, 2006, p. 256)." With the notable exception of largely devalued and relatively little written about historically black colleges and universities, no longer in existence are a large number of vibrant sport and nonsport related black institutions that allowed African Americans to maintain the sense of community necessary to cope with the second-class status they confronted. Also missing, to use W. E. B. Dubois famous phrase, is the consistent engagement of "the talented tenth" with the poor and underrepresented members of the African American community, a fact that has helped contribute to increasing poverty and accompanying violence and death in urban America.

These individuals could take the initiative in mapping strategies and tactics to help overcome the racial inequities in public education and other walks of life that civil rights legislation was designed to eliminate. These individuals could embark on a more aggressive and less deliberate campaign of action that confronts the persistent assumptions of white privilege rather than the dependence on an egalitarian creed as stated in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Title IX and other civil rights legislation. These individuals could also help to ensure that more African American men and women find their way into a larger number of sports, but only if those sports are patterned after the early twentieth century athletic code of preparation for life or are intentionally designed with positive educational outcomes in mind rather than merely a way to keep the exploited in the fields and those in power in the big house. These individuals, moreover, could follow in the footsteps of a pioneer like Professor Edwards and speak more frankly about power relationships and both the more overt and subtle signs of racial inequities in sport. If not, as I noted in my Seward

C. Staley Address at last year's meeting of the North American Society of Sport History, I believe we will never completely overcome the premise of the story told by Malcolm X that the white man's ice is colder or successfully challenge Booker T. Washington's 1895 declaration that "in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers" or ever fully realize Martin Luther King's "dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed (Wiggins, 2010; Shropshire, 1996; Harlan, 1972; Lewis, 1982)."

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