

The current predominance of black athletes

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



Discuss the argument that the current pre-dominance of black athletes in world sprinting is a social and not a ' racial' phenomenon. The following essay will discuss the argument that the current pre-dominance of black athletes in the world of sprinting is a social and not a racial phenomenon. Firstly the article will examine the physical differences between black and white athletes. Secondly, this article will discuss stereotypical beliefs in the world of sport. This essay will give an objective examination of the above issues and to challenge beliefs held and conveyed by individuals. The best 200 times for the 100m sprints, which are all under 10 seconds are all currently held by black athletes, and in addition sprinter of West African decent have filled all eight lanes at the last four Olympics. There is much preprandial musing on why it is that so many of the worlds best runners are black. The issue of race in sport is somewhat baffling in that many people would rather not address at all even though sport has been intricately intertwined with racial issues throughout the Twentieth century. Those who would have us omit the topic altogether argue that analyses typically single out the black athlete, and then attempt to explain his/her inordinate success in ways different than we do with other groups. Critics contend that this is racist, since it perpetuates the idea that blacks are different, and often inferior. Edwards (1972) asserts that a typical theme resulting from such analysis is that blacks are physically superior, but intellectually inferior, to whites. Hoberman (1997) has further made the case that physical prowess, especially in such sports as basketball, has become a defining characteristic of the African-American community, and that beliefs about physical superiority are closely related to an anti-intellectualism that permeates black

male culture. Essentially, Hoberman's argument is that inordinate attention and idolization of prominent black athletes such as Michael Jordan has focused attention away from more realistic and important role models, and this, in turn has stunted intellectual, and social economic development in black communities. Dramatically different percentages of blacks and whites engaged in various sports are not random events. It appears that blacks concentrate on sports in which future economic incentives exist, and in which exclusive training facilities, equipment, and personalized coaching is not necessary during the developmental years. On the other hand, whites tend to gravitate toward individual sports in which developmental expenses are relatively high; they tend to engage in team sports in which future employment as professionals is minimal. Seemingly, economics is partially responsible for these patterns, as is discrimination. As well, once begun, it is conceivable that role modeling and culture play a part in filtering persons coming from different backgrounds into particular activities. Perhaps all that can be said about these tendencies from an equity point of view is that both blacks and whites do not avail themselves of all sports opportunities that exist today. Ultimately this may have implications for such things as taking advantage of the full menu of athletic scholarships offered across sports (Siegel, 1994), or future playing careers as professional athletes.

Notwithstanding, Edwards and Hoberman's observations on the inverse relationship between prowess and intellectual acumen, most studies assessing black-white differences in athletic performance have focused on physical and physiological parameters, and have typically found blacks to be more physically suited than whites for activities requiring speed and power.

If interpreted on face value without critical analysis, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that such differences are innate and racially determined. Edwards (1972) points out, this might lead some to conclude black evolved differently to whites and remain at a more primitive evolutionary level because they are more closely associated with lower animals who are also known to possess greater speed and strength. On the other hand, it is only a short leap to believing that whites evolved to a higher intellectual level than blacks because they dominate virtually all other areas. Consequently, an explanation of black dominance in world sprinting which focuses predominately on physical differences between blacks and whites often results in reinforcing stereotypical ideas about black physical prowess rather than exploring the significance of motivation, intellect, discipline and hard work in accounting for athletic success. Despite the beliefs about race-based abilities, there are also stereotypes held by the athletes, which are likely to inhibit or enhance their involvement in athletics. If a black child believes that she will never be a competitive figure because of lack of buoyancy, but thinks she has biological advantage in sprinting, she will probably self-select herself in the latter activity. By the same token if a white child believes that he can not jump because of his race based physical limitations, but has the hand eye coordination necessary for a sport like tennis, he too will direct his energies to that to which will bring him success. This may often be expressed by peers as George (1994) explains, the fact that peers or coaches tend to push black children more towards short distance events is more reinforcement of stereotypical beliefs. Seemingly, such beliefs mediate the direction and intensity of behaviour, as much, if not more so than

heredity, and can account for current sport demographics. As well, beliefs, like genes, tend to be passed down from generation to generation making the resolution of nature-nurture debates difficult. Consequently the argument for examining this area is to determine what is the fact and what is fiction. Are performance disparities between black and white athletes really a function of fundamental difference in physique and physiology, or are they the result of environment and cultural contingencies? Contrary to what some may argue, an objective examination of these issues attempts to fairly examine the evidence, and to challenge beliefs held and conveyed by individuals. In the end, we may find that these individuals, like many others are not really bigots, but simply misinformed about what really is known about race and performance. Seemingly, knowledge can help us get beyond the false stereotypes that pervade our thinking, and help us direct our behaviour in more productive directions. In the words of athletic geneticist Claude Bouchard " ...I have always worked with the hypothesis that ignorance fosters prejudice. And that knowledge is the greatest safeguard against prejudice" (The Black Athlete, 1989). The issue of race and sport, with special attention to the black athlete, is an interesting story that continues to unfold. Many would prefer not to examine the topic in fear of arousing claims of racism from those who fear such a study simply adds to many of the stereotypical beliefs about black people that tend to separate them from mainstream. Here it has been argued that the opposite is probably true. A study of the black athlete tells us not only about a uniquely talented group of men and women, but about race relations, and beliefs upon which they are founded, and changes that need to be made within and

outside the world of sports to make our society more consistent with the tenets upon which it is based. BIBLIOGRAPHY Edwards, Harry. (1972, March). The myth of the racially superior athlete. *Intellect digest*, 2, 58-60. George, John, ' The virtual disappearance of the white male sprinter in the United states: A speculative essay', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol 11, 1994 pp. 70-7. Hoberman, John, *Darwin's Athletes: How sport has damaged black America and Preserved the myth of Race*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1997, pp. 134-5, 137-9, 187-201, 207. *The Black Athlete: Fact of Fiction*. NBC, 1989