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Americans & Their Games:
Sports and the Immigrant's Tale IV

Of all the things that happened in *"The '60s,"* that near mythical time that changed America – you know, the Civil Rights Movement, the War in Vietnam, "sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll" whose cumulative impact changed America – the one thing with the greatest impact upon America in 2023 is the thing from *"The '60s"* most Americans, if they know anything at all about it, know the least.

That is the Immigration Act of 1965. How did it change America, and how have older Americans descended from earlier immigrants reacted to those changes?

Well, as it has been said, “it’s complicated.”

Concluding this four-part exploration of “Sports and the Immigrant’s Tale” about New Americans seeking inclusion, two intertwined thoughts occur to me as I write on October 27. Granted, in the interval between me writing this and you reading it, things might have changed, but the common thread twining the two is “some things never change.”

In the first thread, like many Americans still reeling from the impact of the Immigration Act of 1965, while more polished than the wretched Albert Johnson, who co-sponsored the Immigration Act of 1924, new House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana) joins a long line of anti-immigration activists. He is a “hawk on immigration; he has introduced legislation three times aimed at tightening the asylum system.” He wants to “cut off federal funding to ‘sanctuary cities.’” And he “opposes the National Origin-Based Antidiscrimination for Nonimmigrants Act (NO BAN ACT).” [1] [2] [3]

In the second thread, people still keep coming to America – people you’ll meet later in this ***Book Note*** – people like Martina Navratilova, Charles Jock, and Enkelejda Shehaj. New Americans, who, just like those who came before them, disprove the anti-immigrant vitriol of nativist bigots. They are people just like Stan Musial, Yogi Berra, Lou Groza, and Don Shula who enriched American culture after the Immigration Act of 1924 reduced immigration to a trickle.

Before we get to the Immigration Act of 1965, who were the sons of eastern and southern European immigrants who exposed the lies of bigots and enriched American culture? There is not space to name them all. But even if you’re not into sports trivia, bear with me as I briefly sketch the life and careers of exemplars, like Musial, Berra, Shula, and Groza.

A first ballot Hall of Famer, Stan Musial spent 22 seasons playing for the St. Louis Cardinals. He was born in Donora, Pennsylvania, southeast of Pittsburgh in what western Pennsylvanians call the Mon Valley, which in the early and mid-20th century “used to be a fairly thriving multi-ethnic area comprised of Italians, Eastern Europeans, and African Americans that turned out steel, zinc, and world class athletes.” Musial’s story typifies the classic immigrant’s tale. His mother was from the Carpathian Mountains region of eastern Europe. A Polish immigrant, his father always referred to

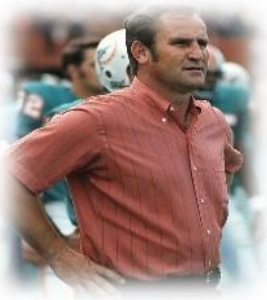
Musial by his Polish nickname “Stashu.” His parents worked hard and made sure their children were educated.

Like many a patriotic immigrant, his baseball career was interrupted by World War II, but returning to baseball in 1946, he led the Cardinals to their third World Series championship in five years. After his playing career ended, with his business partner Julius “Biggie” Garangani, Musial owned a number of businesses in St. Louis, “but his primary focuses were on real estate and ‘Stan and Biggie’s,’” the most famous steakhouse in St. Louis. He was married to his beloved wife Lillian for 72 years. In 2011, President Barack Obama awarded Musial the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He died in 2013 from the ravages of Alzheimer’s Disease at 93. [4]

Yogi Berra really needs no introduction. Born in St. Louis on what was once called “Dago Hill” but is now simply called “The Hill,” Berra’s parents emigrated to America from Robecchetto, Italy circa 1910. Yogi became a pro ballplayer in 1942 and enlisted in the Navy in 1943. He served as “a machine gunner and saw action on D-Day aboard a rocket boat deployed just off the Normandy coast.” He refused to apply for the Purple Heart he earned because he did not want to worry his mother. [5] Berra’s career as a baseball player and American legend is so well-known it does not need retelling, but to learn more about the inimitable Yogi you’ll want to see the film “It Ain’t Over,” which transcends baseball to become a testament to one man and the immigrant’s tale. A fine film narrated by Berra’s granddaughter, in loving detail it documents exactly how Berra and other immigrant children like him enriched America. [6]

Possessor of one of the great nicknames in sports history, Lou “The Toe” Groza starred for the Cleveland Browns back in the days when the Browns were actually good! Born to immigrant parents from Transylvania, “The Toe” was one of four boys in a very athletic family. Lettering in football, basketball, and baseball for Martins Ferry High School, Groza then attended Ohio State, where he played for legendary coach Paul Brown. World War II interrupted his athletic career. Seeing action in the Pacific theater, Groza received an offer from Brown to play for Cleveland upon his return. Do you detect a trend here – children of immigrants putting their careers on hold to serve their country exposing the venality of nativist bigots? Lou “The Toe” Groza played tackle on the offensive line and became a legend as a placekicker. Kicking straight ahead unlike modern soccer style

kickers, Groza was one of the greatest at the position in NFL history. A member of the NFL's 1950s All-Decade team as well as the 50th Anniversary All-Time Team, Groza showed his football roots when he said he just happened to be good at kicking, but he always considered himself a tackle. [7]



Son of Hungarian immigrants, Don Shula won more games – 347 – than any other coach in NFL history. Raised in Painesville, Ohio, Shula starred in basketball and football at John Carroll University, whose stadium is Don Shula Stadium. (Interest of full transparency, I am an alumnus of John Carroll University.) Shula played for the Cleveland Browns and the then-Baltimore Colts. He began coaching professionally with the Detroit Lions and then the Baltimore Colts and Miami Dolphins. Shula's 1972 Miami Dolphins were the first and are the only NFL team to go undefeated during the regular season and to win the Super Bowl – completing a perfect, undefeated regular and playoff season. If you travel at all, you've probably eaten at "Shula's Steak House – One of America's Best." [8]

All of that ethnic success notwithstanding, with Prescott Hall, Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr. and other xenophobes we met in Part III triumphant, immigration fell to a trickle under the three-part pressure of the Immigration Act of 1924's nationality quota system, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and WWII during the 1940s.

But then *"The '60s"* happened.

In the 1960s, faced by both domestic civil rights challenges and internationally by newly freed colonial nations looking for American leadership on liberty and freedom, the United States faced intense pressure to change its discriminatory, nationality quota immigration policy. By the 1950s and the 1960s, the restrictive immigration laws were an embarrassment. President Harry Truman created the 1952 Commission on Immigration and Naturalization because "Our immigration and naturalization policies are of major importance to our own security and to the defense of the free world." [9] Its report on immigration regulations, "Whom We Shall Welcome," served as the blueprint for 1965's Hart–Cellar Act – The Immigration Act of 1965. [10]

U.S. Sen. Philip Hart (D-Michigan) and Brooklyn's U.S. Rep. Manny Cellar (D-New York) sponsored the bill. Cellar had opposed the 1924 Act and worked for the next 40 years to get rid of the nationality quota system. On Liberty Island in New York Harbor, with the Statue of Liberty in the foreground, on October 3, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration Act of 1965. It ended preferences for white immigrants that reached back to the 1790's Naturalization Act which limited citizenship to free white persons of good character. [11]

What were 1965's Immigration & Nationality Act's key provisions?

First, it abolished the national-origins quota. This meant that it eliminated national origin and race as the basis for immigration. Two, it created a seven-category preference system, which gave priority to relatives of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents and to professionals and other individuals with specialized skills. Three, immediate relatives and "special immigrants" were not subject to numerical restrictions. Some of the "special immigrants" included ministers, former employees of the U.S. government, foreign medical graduates, among others. Four, for the first time, immigration from the Western Hemisphere was limited. [12]

Although when seen through the lens of 2023 political attitudes, the Act seems almost surrealistically progressive and humane, that is in many ways an accidental and unintended consequence. Yes, under the pressure of *"The '60s"* politics, America wanted to get rid of the nationality quota system, but it still wanted to keep America looking pretty much like it already looked – essentially white and, if not of northern European, of European ancestry.

U.S. Rep. Michael Feighan, a Democrat from Cleveland and a descendant of Irish immigrants, unwittingly proved the truth of the grandchildren of earlier immigrants pulling up the ladder to prevent newer immigrants from entering when he insisted that *"family unification"* should take priority over *"employability."* He believed such a policy would preserve the country's existing ethnic profile because if immigrants were sponsored by families already here, then the proportion of each group in society would remain unchanged. U.S. Sen. Hiram Fong (R-Hawaii) agreed, arguing "that Asians represented six-tenths of a percent of U.S. population … and will never reach 1% … the cultural pattern of the U.S. would *not* change." [13]

They were wrong.

Their plan resulted in “chain migration” of recent immigrants so that by the end of the 1970s non-European immigration was twice that of Europeans. Throughout the last 30 years of the 20th century, a third tidal wave of immigration tripled the percentage of foreign-born persons residing in the United States from 5% in 1970 to 14% in 2016. It was only 1% less than the 15% in 1910 that so agitated Prescott Hall and Henry Cabot Lodge. [14]

The composition of those immigrants also changed.

Since, by the late 20th century, most older Americans descended from earlier immigrant groups did not know or have connections with family living in the old country, they had no one to sponsor. But newer immigrants from the Middle East, Asia, South Asian Indian, and Latin American families did. The mix of immigrants switched from European to a more global, a more Asian, a more nonwhite world. In 1965, Sen. Fong said Asians were less than 1% of the American population. In 2020, Asian Americans represent 6.2% of the population and are America’s fastest growing racial or ethnic minority. [15]

The special skills and medical education provisos led to a large influx of Indian and Middle Eastern doctors. Serving at St. Bonaventure University, for a time I lived on the Southern Tier of New York state. If it were not for the large number of Middle Eastern, South Asian and other recent immigrant doctors, the health and welfare of all people living in that region would be endangered.

The act transformed America. It gave rise to much of today’s anti-immigrant fervor infecting politics and fueling culture war issues. I happen to believe that the transformation enriched American culture, just as every previous wave of immigration made America a richer, more varied, and more dynamic culture. But not everyone agrees with me, for just as in every previous wave of immigration, there are those bitterly opposed to the New Americans. I call them 21st century Know Nothings. They fear the end of white Christian America. They want to build walls and bunkers to keep out people who don’t look like them.

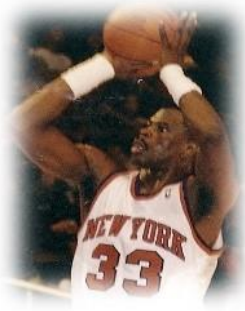
It’s an old story.

It’s an American story.

Despite everything, desperate people seeking freedom and opportunity are still coming to America. Why? Because as battered as our ideals have been these last years, the glittering notions of liberty, freedom, equality, and opportunity still function as beacons to the world.

In addition to those “Docs” I mentioned a moment ago, who’s still coming to America?

Well, athletes like Patrick Ewing and Martina Navratilova. Ewing came as a child, but Navratilova originally came on an athletic visa. There is a cluster of visa categories for athletes, the B-1 and B-2 specifically for athletes and the P-1 temporary visa for athletes scheduled to perform at an athletic event, e.g. tennis players and golfers, and the O-1 visas for people with extraordinary talent like world class athletes and artists. [16]

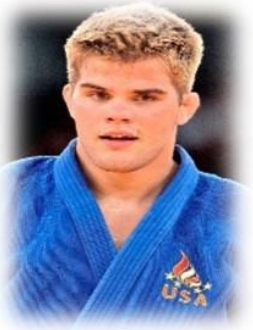


Ewing is a retired Hall of Fame basketball player and coach, best known for his tenure in the NBA, especially with the New York Knicks. He was born in Kingston, Jamaica and moved to the United States at 12. Growing up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ewing played college basketball at Georgetown University in the 1980s and for the New York Knicks in the 1990s. Inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2008, Ewing is remembered for his on-court dominance, determination, work ethic, and leadership. Like thousands of immigrants before him, Ewing succeeded because of his perseverance and dedication. [17]

Widely regarded as one of the greatest female tennis players of all-time, Martina Navratilova was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia – now the Czech Republic – in 1956. At 18, in 1975, she sought refuge in the United States. She became a U.S. citizen in 1981. That same year, Navratilova courageously came out as gay, making her one of the first prominent athletes to do so. Over the years, she has been a staunch advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Involved in various endeavors, she's been active in numerous charitable activities. Like all the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of immigrants we've met, she faced barriers, met them head-on and succeeded because of her resilience, talent, and work ethic. Recently diagnosed with both throat and breast cancer, she remains an image of strength.

Ewing and Navratilova are familiar names even to non-sports fans, but who are some other post-1965 immigrants still coming to America?

Here are three stories demonstrating that war brings America jewels, refugees seeking freedom and opportunity, if we only have the wit to recognize it. Born in 1989 in Sudan, Charles Jock and his family emigrated after the Second Sudanese War. They spent time in an Ethiopian refugee camp, but about the time Charles was 8 they emigrated to San Diego. Growing up in California, Jock was an outstanding middle-distance runner showcasing his talent in the 800 meters. He ran for University of California Irvine, winning the NCAA Men's Outdoor championships in the 800 in 2012. He qualified for the U.S. Olympic team in 2016. [18]



Nick Delpopolo's story is one of redemption and perseverance. Born in Montenegro in 1989, Delpopolo was adopted as an infant by an American family and raised in America. He developed talent as a child practicing judo from a young age. He was so good he qualified for the 2012 London Olympics. Suspended for testing positive for cannabis, he accepted responsibility for his actions. After serving his suspension, he made a comeback and qualified for the 2016 Rio Olympics. [19]

Enkelejda Shehaj's story is another positive contribution to America from someone fleeing the turmoil and terror of the 1990s' Balkan Wars. Born in 1969 in Albania, she was a champion pistol shot. She represented Albania in the 1992 and 1996 Olympics. After 1996's Atlanta Olympics, seeking a better life in the United States, she chose not to return to Albania. This decision meant leaving her family and starting over in a foreign country. She settled in Naples, Florida, where she and her husband opened a small restaurant featuring Eastern European cuisine. She also resumed her shooting career. After becoming an American citizen and nearly two decades away from competition, she qualified for the 2016 Olympics. Competing after an almost 20-year absence is a testament to her fortitude and persistence. What's the old cliché? Quitters never win and winners never quit. [20]

Enkelejda Shehaj is living testimony to that.

So, through the lens of sports, we see that the story continues. People seeking hope, opportunity, and freedom are still coming to America. And, sometimes, they still meet hostility, resentment, and rejection. It's an old story. But they persist in building a new life for themselves and their families making America a better place for all.

The lens of sports reveals that just like the descendants of the indigenous people, just like the descendants of African Americans, just like women seeking their rights, generations of immigrants from the Irish and Germans in the mid-19th century to millions of southern and eastern Europeans in the early 20th century to south Asians, Latinos, and, yet again, eastern Europeans in the late-20th and early 21st century, these immigrant New Americans seek their rights by appealing to America's founding values – "We hold these truths …," "We the People …," and the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights.

Their story is one of the essential threads in the tapestry of American stories – immigrants and the quest for inclusion. It's the essential American story – the story of how people first excluded from the rights and benefits of America's glittering founding ideals sought inclusion by appealing to those very ideals while those who would exclude them deny those very ideals.

And as any glance at the current news will tell you, that struggle continues.

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