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Book Notes #148

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'Americans & Their Games' (Part III-B)
Freedom's Fault Lines: African Americans & Sports in American History

Viewing the African American experience through the lens of sports reveals a purgatorial mosaic of discrimination and pain flecked with images of hope, perseverance, and triumph. As the 19th century closed with Black players banned from professional baseball, the 20th century opened with a Black man heavyweight boxing champion of the world. As boxing fades into a marginal niche sport, it is hard for 21st century Americans to realize the cataclysmic impact of Jack Johnson's triumph.

In the early 20th century, boxing, horse racing, baseball, and intercollegiate football dominated the American sporting landscape.

Played largely in northeastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, professional football was a regional roughhouse sport with only a handful of Black players. Only one is clearly documented. Charles Follis played for the Shelby, Ohio *Blues* from 1902 to 1906. [1] In the era's vastly more popular intercollegiate game, few African Americans played. The first were George Jewett at Michigan in 1890 and Fred Patterson at Ohio State in 1891. [2] As we have seen, professional baseball

was a “Whites Only” sport; intercollegiate baseball was a minor sport, but Harvard’s William Clarence Matthews excelled. He almost integrated professional baseball in 1905, but even the desperately inept Boston Braves dared not breach “the gentlemen’s agreement” banning Black ballplayers. [3]

Horse racing was the Crown Prince.

But if horse racing was Crown Prince, then boxing was King.

And the heavyweight champion of the world was “King of Kings.”

Turning the world upside down, in 1908 a Black man ruled as Heavyweight Champion of the World. It ignited a crusade among white supremacists to find a “Great White Hope” who would restore the natural order. It was only the first iteration of a boxing cycle that played out across the entire 20th century.

And almost always, the cycle betrayed America’s confused, complicated, and conflicted racial attitudes about who was in, who was out; who was white, who was Black – a veritable stew of “whodoo” and “who knew.” At times Black boxers were the villains; at others they were treated as “honorary” whites championing American freedom.

In 1930, German Max Schmeling defeated American Jack Sharkey for the heavyweight crown. In 1936, Schmeling defended his championship by defeating African American Joe Louis – “The Brown Bomber.” By the time of their rematch in 1938, Schmeling, representing Nazi Germany, unfairly came to symbolize the emerging enemy. Schmeling was not a member of the Nazi Party; his manager was Jewish; and he rejected Nazi claims of Aryan superiority. [4] Still, he was seen as the “enemy.” Just as in the 1936 Olympics when African American Jesse Owens exploded Adolf Hitler’s Aryan myth, in 1938 white Americans found themselves in the conflicted position of having a Black man as avatar of freedom, when Joe Louis knocked out Schmeling in the first round. Louis became a semi-beloved figure in American lore, but offstage there always lurked the search for a white man who could beat him. In the early 1940s, Louis fought a series of bouts with Billy Conn. Louis won, but they were close, hotly contested affairs.

After World War II, Jersey Joe Walcott, Archie Moore, and Ezzard Charles (all Black) and Rocky Marciano replayed the cycle. Again, white Protestant Americans found themselves in an ambivalent position, for Marciano was the son of Roman Catholic Italian immigrants. We’ll discuss it in the ***Book Note*** on “Sports and the Immigrant’s Tale,” but hard as it might be for some to imagine in 2023, within my lifetime Roman Catholics were made to feel un-American and Italian-Americans were discriminated against as “not quite white.”

When Floyd Patterson won the heavyweight title in the late 1950s, the cycle repeated itself. In 1959, Swedish boxer Ingemar Johansson defeated Patterson, who reclaimed the title in two subsequent

bouts. Patterson then found himself the focus of scorn from both Sonny Liston and a young Cassius Clay, who became an American icon as Muhammad Ali. Ali and Liston both claimed Patterson was not "Black enough," by which they meant his cultural attitudes. During the 1970s, Ali's major opponent, African American Joe Frazier, found himself in the ambiguous and culturally fraught position of being the "honorary" white reclaiming the title from the unapologetically Black Muhammad Ali.

In his lifetime, Ali was both an American hero and anti-hero. As an anti-hero he opposed the War in Vietnam and became an outspoken champion of Black civil rights and African American advancement. As a hero, Americans of all hues came to admire his swagger, his resilience, and his total commitment to his religious and social beliefs. Completing the arc of his tumultuous life, he lit the Olympic flame at the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics. As the century wore on, actual boxing faded in popularity. ***Quick question:*** Who in 2023 is the heavyweight Champion of the World? [5] Today, boxing has been marginally supplanted by something called Ultimate Fighting, a throwback to 19th century bareknuckle fighting featuring both men and women challenging any notion of human social progress. Well, maybe some social progress, for women are included in the neo-pagan "sport."

If boxing faded, the cycle found new life in the movie ***Rocky*** and its sequels in which the underdog Rocky Balboa defeats the arrogant Black champion Apollo Creed. Sylvester Stallone, author and star, unwittingly I believe, recreated the mythic cycle of a "Great White Hope" defeating the Black champion restoring white self-esteem and pride. Although its surface theme of an underdog palooka training by hammering sides of beef with his fists in a slaughterhouse cooler struck many a resonant chord, its perhaps unintended subliminal sub-theme played all the American racial tropes – just in reverse.

Thought: Maybe the major racial trope in American society is much simpler, at least conceptually, than we think. It's simply the story of Black and white Americans not quite knowing what to do with one another as Black Americans persist in their quest to be included in the American Story by appealing to America's foundational values while those white Americans who would exclude them find themselves denying the very values that have historically made America *America*.

Aside: As it turns out, I was at the March 24, 1975 Chuck "The Bayonne Bleeder" Wepner versus Muhammad Ali fight at the old Richfield Coliseum between Cleveland and Akron, Ohio that inspired Sylvester Stallone to create Rocky Balboa and the entire ***Rocky*** film franchise. I went with a group of people from Canton, Ohio. Curiously enough, I sat next to Marion Motley, one of the greatest professional football players of all time, on the bus ride to the fight and behind him at the bout. He shared that he thought Sugar Ray Robinson was the toughest man that he ever met and that boxing was the toughest of all sports, because, as he said, "In football, you can always run out-of-bounds."

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If boxing reveals one step in the conflicted tango that white and Black Americans have danced with one another, then baseball and football reveal two more as

they first included then excluded Black Americans and then in the middle of the 20th century grudgingly welcomed them back again.

As we saw last week, Jackie Robinson was not the first professional Black baseball player. There were more than a few before Cap Anson and Professional Baseball's "gentlemen's agreement" in 1887 banned them. Black ballplayers, however, did not simply put their bats and balls away, but set out to create their own leagues. In the late 19th century, several leagues were founded but soon floundered. They included 1887's the National Colored Base Ball League and the amateur Union Base Club on Chicago's south side founded by Frank Leland in 1888. Various mid-western leagues and barnstorming teams were founded in the 1890s, played against one another for a while and then faded. [6]

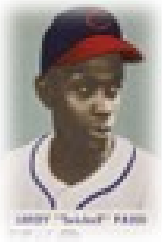
After several false starts in the early 20th century, in 1910 Rube Foster, a great player of the era, revived the idea of an all-Black league of teams owned by Black businessmen. Unfortunately, World War I foiled that plan. [7] In 1920, Foster, an archetypal American entrepreneur, who, in addition to being a great player was an even better manager, promoter, and executive, founded the Negro National League. It was a major league baseball operation. It included Foster's own Chicago American Giants, and teams across the Midwest. [8] Foster was a controversial figure to some, but he was also a promotional genius who "worked long and hard to keep the young Negro League afloat." [9]

In 1923, an Eastern Colored League (the Mutual Association of Eastern Colored Baseball Clubs) was formed. Although both it and the Negro National League were financially shaky, they persisted throughout the 1920s; from 1924 to 1927 their respective champions competed in an end-of-season Negro World Series. [10] By the late 1920s and the early 1930s, under the pressure of The Great Depression, they collapsed.

In 1932, Pittsburgh's Cumberland W. Posey attempted a new Black league called the East-West League. Although it featured Posey's legendary Homestead (Pennsylvania) *Grays*, the league failed in its first year. In 1933, another Pittsburgher W.A. (Gus) Greenlee operating Posey's great opponent, the Pittsburgh *Crawfords*, founded a new Negro National League. [11] In 1937, a Negro American League was formed. Both leagues, although at times financially strained, finally flourished as the Depression lessened and World War II created an economic boom benefiting both Black and white Americans.

With the ironic prosperity World War II created, the leagues and their players flourished. In addition to the Grays and Crawfords, teams such as the Cleveland *Buckeyes,* the Newark *Eagles,* and the Kansas City *Stars* became well-known American institutions. The greatest of the players earned a $1,000 per month, and showmen like Satchel Paige earned as much as $30,000 to $40,000 per year pitching, barnstorming, and making special appearances against teams composed of both Black and white stars. [12]

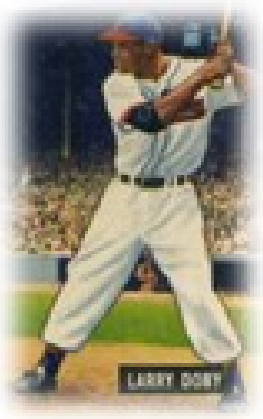
> Babe Ruth once allegedly said that Paige was the greatest pitcher he ever faced. I recall an exhibit I saw in the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City quoting Dizzy Dean, one of the



great white pitchers of the era, saying "That if 'ole Satch and I pitched on the same team we'd wrap up the pennant by the Fourth of July and go fishing the rest of the summer until the World Series."

Rivaling Major League Baseball in both popularity and revenue during the 1930s and 40s, the Negro Leagues' stars such as Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Monte Irvin, James "Cool Papa" Bell, and Rube Foster transcended their time and are among the greatest players ever. They were finally admitted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in the 1970s and 1980s. [13]The first admitted was Paige after a public plea from Ted Williams during his 1966 Hall of Fame induction speech when he said, "I hope that someday, the names of Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson can … be added to the symbol of the great Negro League players that are not here only because they were not given a chance." [14]

In a great irony, 1947's breaking of the 1887 "gentlemen's agreement" banning Black ballplayers from professional baseball by Jackie Robinson, Branch Rickey, and the Brooklyn Dodgers led to end of the Negro Leagues. The Negro National League was dead by 1948; the Negro American League held on until folding in 1960. [15]



The change was slow, but it quickened in the 1950s. In 1946, there were no Black players in Major League Baseball; in 1947 there were three; in 1948, with the play of Larry Doby and Satchel Paige aiding their cause, the Cleveland *Indians* won their second and last World Series; in 1949 Jackie Robinson was the first Black player to win the National League Most Valuable Player Award; and in 1950, Erie, Pennsylvania's Sam Jethroe won the National League Rookie of the Year Award for the hapless Boston Braves, who 50 years earlier hadn't the courage to sign William Clarence Matthews. In the 1950s, joined by Willie Mays, Monte Irvin, Don Newcombe, Roy Campanella, and Hank Aaron, Jackie Robinson's National League dominated baseball. Slowly, the American League followed Cleveland's lead. It took the New York Yankees until 1955 to sign a Black player – Elston Howard; the last team to integrate was the Boston Red Sox in 1959 with infielder Elijah "Pumpsie" Green. [16]

Aside: I've been a Cleveland baseball fan since 1954. I could tell you the starting lineup of that ill-fated team that won 111 games and lost the World Series to Willie Mays' New York Giants; Mays made the most famous catch in baseball history running down Vic Wertz's long drive in the endless pasture that was centerfield in the old Polo Grounds. It's the fate of a Cleveland fan that the greatest catch in baseball history, our guy hit the ball!

As frustrating as the Cleveland baseball franchise now known as the *Guardians* has been since its founding in 1901, it has led the way in racial and social progress. They have two very positive marks in their history – no, actually, three. They were the first American League team to have a Black player – Larry Doby in 1947 [17]; of the 36 Black players in either the American, National or high

minor leagues in 1949, 14 were with the Cleveland franchise [18]; and Cleveland had the first Black Major League manager – Frank Robinson from 1975 to 1977. [19]

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If asked which professional sports league first broke the color line and re-admitted Black Americans, even serious sports fans and scholars would answer Major League Baseball.

They'd be wrong.

It was professional football.

The story follows a path similar to baseball's. In the early days of professional football, there were a number of Black players. In the 1920s, greats such as Fritz Pollard played for the Akron Pros; Bobby Marshall played for the NFL's Duluth Eskimos; Dave Myers played for the Brooklyn FB Dodgers and Joe Lillard ("The Midnight Express") played for the Chicago Cardinals. [20] Then in 1933, pressured by Washington, D.C.'s George Preston Marshall, who owned the only team south of the Mason-Dixon Line, NFL owners banned Black players. [21] To this day, the NFL carefully finesses the story.

The first professional sports leagues to integrate were the National Football League (NFL) and the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) in 1946, a year before Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby played Major League Baseball.

If we want to be technical, we'd say that the first Black players in the NFL were Kenny Washington and Woody Strode. [22] Both, in a nice historic coincidence, were college teammates of Jackie Robinson's at UCLA. When the old Cleveland Rams moved to Los Angeles in the 1940s, in order to use the publicly owned Los Angeles Coliseum they needed to integrate. Washington and Strode were their solution. Strode played only one year before embarking on a highly successful career as a movie actor. [23] Washington damaged his knee but still managed to play three seasons for the Los Angeles Rams.

Note that I said, "If you want to be technical," because in 1946 Paul Brown integrated the AAFC's Cleveland Browns by signing Marion Motley and Bill Willis. Willis had played for Brown at Ohio State; Brown knew Motley from his time as a high school coach at Massillon (Ohio) whose archrival Canton McKinley starred Motley. [24] Of course, in 1950, the NFL and the AAFC merged forming the modern NFL. So, the first four Black players in the NFL were Marion Motley, Bill Willis, Kenny Washington, and Woody Strode. Featuring Motley, Otto Graham and several other future Hall of Famers, Brown's *Browns* (they're named after him) won all four of the AAFC's championships and the 1950 NFL championship in their first year in the league.

Were the Los Angeles Rams, Branch Rickey, and Paul Brown social activists seeking moral justice?

I'm not sure. I've not been able to find any explanation other than access to the Los Angeles Coliseum that might have motivated the Rams' management, but I'll give Rickey and Brown credit for having, at the least, mixed motives. First and foremost, they wanted to win, but so did Fred Heaney with the Boston Braves who passed on William Clarence Matthews and George Halas, whose Chicago Bears wanted Kenny Washington in 1941 but couldn't muster the backbone, to borrow a phrase, *just do it*! But Rickey, a shrewd businessman was also a devout Methodist graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University. He planned for several years to integrate baseball as both a smart competitive move and the right thing to do. Brown's high school teams at Massillon High School were integrated, as were his archrival Canton McKinley's. (*Interest of full disclosure:* I am an alumnus of Canton McKinley High School.)

The point is Rickey and Brown's motives were quintessentially American, which is to say they mixed morality and money to find a winning combination. Twenty-first century ideologues of the right and the left both lose sight of the genius at the heart of American success. It's called compromise. Rickey and Brown didn't compromise exactly, but they mixed ambition and competitiveness with just enough moral sense to do, to quote Spike Lee, "the right thing."

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Sports in the last half of the 20th century was at the epicenter of American social progress. Earl Llyod integrated the NBA; Wilma Rudolph not only showed that girls could run but that Black girls could run and win an Olympic Gold Medal; Althea Gibson integrated a reluctant tennis world winning at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open; in 1965, Texas Western won the NCAA men's basketball championship with the first all-Black starting five; in the epochal year of 1968 Arthur Ashe was the first Black man to win the U.S. Open and Tommie Smith and John Carlos took a stand for social justice giving the Black Power salute at the Mexico City Olympics; in 1971, in the words of Paul "Bear" Bryant, USC's Sam Cunningham did more for integration in the American South than anyone else when he demolished Alabama's all-white football team spurring integrated sports in the Southeastern Conference; throughout the era players like Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Michael Jordan transformed basketball into a Black social experience and the "city game"; and Black men like Roberto Clemente, Jim Brown, Muhammad Ali, and LeBron James became voices of moral clarity demanding social justice and speaking out on behalf of their people.

But work remains to be done. It is now sadly clear that the election of the first Black President of the United States did not signal a post-racial America. In fact, it revealed quite the opposite – that race is ***the*** issue in American society. It is not the only issue in American society, but until the question of race is somehow transcended the great promise of America remains unfulfilled.

Sports, which is so intimately woven into the fabric of American life and the weave of America's many stories, shows the promise of a better America every time it shows a crowd of white and Black people cheering for the same team, for the same athletes – everyone for a moment oblivious to color. Our challenge remains how to make that moment, those moments, all the moments of American life.

As Amanda Gorman said of America – "it's not broken, it's just unfinished." The African American experience in sports suggests that to finish it, we all need, in the words of the poet, to not forget "to just keep on keeping on."

Coda: Some people will say those final words are bland and don't go anywhere. Fine, I don't pretend to have the answer other than to say, "What other choice do we have?"

Sports makes us aware in a way few other things in our society can do that we are all in this together. Sports teaches us we're better competitively when we play as a team using all our people and we're better morally when we leave no one behind and live up to the dictates of our creed to treat one another as we would wish to be treated.

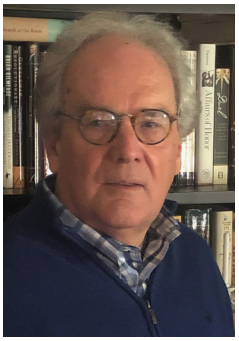
Sports teaches us that.

It did for me at a very young age when on two occasions I heard different neighbors say two things I've never forgotten. On one occasion, I heard a neighbor castigate all Black people saying some execrable things about how bad they were, using the n-word; I thought that can't be right because Willie Mays is Black, and he's not like that. On another occasion, I heard a neighbor, cheering for Ingemar Johansson to beat Floyd Patterson, also using that racist word. I was for Patterson because he was American. At 12, I'd not yet developed any geopolitical sense, but Patterson was an American just like me. He was my guy. It made me ask myself, "What's up with all of this?"

Well, now I know.

That I have any sensitivity to these issues comes from those two experiences and the fact I went to an integrated, public high school. In our time, it beat everyone (well, maybe not Massillon) because "it play(ed) as a team using all of its people."

With the exception of military service, sports teaches us with more emotional and moral resonance than anything else in American life the absolute truth that we are at our best when *"we play as a team using all of our people."*



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