Minority black Olympic athletes in the 20th and early 21st centuries

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Sport has the power to unite people in a way little else can. Sport can create hope where there was only despair. It breaks down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of discrimination. Sport speaks to people in a language they can understand.
(Nelson Mandela cited in Muir, 2007)

It is generally agreed that the first black athlete to compete and win a medal in the Olympic Games was George Poage, an American, who was awarded a bronze medal in the 400m hurdle. It was 1904, the third modern Olympics since the games had been resurrected by Pierre de Coubertin in 1896. In the same afternoon, another African-American, Joseph Stadler, received a silver medal for the high jump event and the following day Poage secured another bronze, this time for the 200m hurdle.

This was the triumphant start of what would be countless victories for black athletes at the Olympic Games. Since 1904, many black athletes representing countries including those in which they are usually part of a minority ethnic group (for example, countries in North America, Europe and Asia) have achieved outstanding success. Notable athletes include: Jesse Owens, winner of four gold medals for the USA at the 1936 Berlin Olympics; Wilma Rudolph (USA), who received three gold medals at Rome in 1960, Mohammed Ali (then Cassius Clay) (USA), who was awarded with the light-heavyweight boxing title also in 1960; Daley Thompson for Great Britain who obtained a gold medal for the decathlon event in 1980 at Moscow and another at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics; Linford Christie (GB), who won gold in the 100m sprint at Barcelona in 1992; Denise Lewis (GB) winning gold in the heptathlon event at Sydney in 2000; and Kelly Holmes (GB), who was awarded two gold medals in 2004 at the Athens Olympics.

Despite the undeniable success of numerous black athletes in the Olympic Games throughout the twentieth century, their situation both on and off the field has sometimes proven difficult. A significant number of black athletes have felt they had to negotiate the often complex issues of representing a country in which they are ethnically a minority. The participation of minority black athletes in the Olympic Games has often revealed and mirrored inequalities in society as a whole. For instance, before (and during) the Civil Rights Movement, African-American athletes were members of the USA Olympic team, and revered within this role, yet when they returned to the USA they were unable to share public spaces with white people or even drink from the same water fountains. Furthermore, some athletes have used the Olympics as a stage for protest against racial prejudice within and outside of their own countries.

At the same time, a considerable proportion of people (of different ethnicities as well as athletes and non-athletes) would argue that sport - in particular Olympic participation - has the power to diminish ethnic and racial inequalities, and has been significant in
overcoming problems of racial discrimination. After all, the Olympic Games is an environment where people from a broad range of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds compete together and are watched by an equally diverse audience. On the other hand, some would (and have) argued that the involvement of minority black athletes in the Olympic arena, and in particular scrutiny of their successes within this field, has exacerbated existing racial prejudices and stereotypes in ways which intensify social, economic and cultural divisions between ethnic groups.

**JESSE OWENS AND THE NAZI OLYMPICS**

It was in Berlin in 1936, a unique point in time for the Olympic Games, that Jesse Owens triumphed in the face of extreme racial prejudice through his successes on the field. Germany was under Nazi occupation, and Chancellor Adolf Hitler was eager not only to promote the city of Berlin, but also to demonstrate Aryan athletic ‘superiority’. Owens, then 22, was one of a number of black athletes in the USA team which also included Cornelius Johnson, who would go onto win gold for the high jump. Somewhat surprisingly given the context, the black athletes enjoyed more freedom in Nazi Germany than they did back home in the USA, and were able to mix freely with the white majority population. Unsurprisingly, however, Hitler appeared to purposely snub the black athletes, refusing to congratulate the black winners, although a different version of events claims that he was merely fulfilling his role as host to remain neutral (Barry, 1975). What is certain is that Hitler was extremely displeased with the defeat of German athletes by black Americans in several key track and field events, as recalled by his architect Albert Speer (Speer, 1970). Owens and his other winning black team-mates, through their success in the Olympic arena had unsettled Hitler’s racial purity propaganda, especially as the German audience were undoubtedly enamoured with Owens (Barry, 1975). Although this was a relatively small victory, particularly in light of the Nazi’s atrocities, it is however an important example of how the Olympic Games have acted as a stage for playing out the struggle for racial equality.

What is also interesting about Jesse Owens is that despite his success and huge popularity, when he returned from the Games he struggled to find work within the sporting realm and was unable to secure any lucrative sponsorship deals. Owens found himself in low-status, low-paid jobs, eventually filing for bankruptcy; his team mate Cornelius Johnson faded into similar obscurity (Edmondson, 2007). Unfortunately, this appears to be a common story when the long-term careers of minority black athletes are uncovered.

**BLACK OLYMPIANS AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

Another extremely successful minority black athlete was Wilma Rudolph, born in Tennessee in 1940. She was one of the last children of a very large family, and grew up in economic hardship. She was born prematurely and suffered ill health as a child, contracting scarlet fever and double pneumonia, and was unable to walk unaided until the age of eight due to paralysis in her left leg (Bunch and Robinson, 1985). Rudolph was able to overcome these obstacles and by the time she reached high school age, was a promising athlete. Recommended by her high school coach, she was able to enter the Tennessee State University team when she was just fifteen, and was quickly recognised as one of their fastest female sprinters. She attended the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956, but did not win a medal. However, when Rudolph was twenty, she travelled to
Rome to compete in the 1960 Olympic Games. Here she won three gold medals, the first female American to do so, in the 100m and 200m sprints and the 400m relay. She was exceptionally popular with the Olympic audience, the Italians nicknamed her ‘La Gazella Nera’ (the black gazelle), the French ‘La Perle Noir’ (the black pearl), demonstrating clearly that her race was, for the audience, a significant defining category. (Smith, 2006: 61).

Wilma Rudolph

After the Olympics, Wilma Rudolph embarked on a European tour with her team-mates, and was received warmly by thousands of fans (indeed a wax-work model was placed in Madame Tussauds in her honour). She returned home to a big welcoming ceremony in her hometown of Clarksville, Tennessee and made national television appearances (Davis, 1992). Despite her considerable success and fame, Rudolph felt she had reached her peak at a young age, and within the next few years several female competitors were able to beat her records. She retired and moved in to teaching and coaching, and was asked to be part of ‘Operation Champ’ in 1967, a government programme aimed at inspiring young people in deprived areas to participate in sport (Davis, 1992: 128-9). Wilma Rudolph was a success story, not only because she demonstrated what minority black athletes could achieve within a broader context of racial prejudice, but also because she was able to maintain a successful career within the sporting world after her retirement.

Cassius Clay, who would later become world famous as Mohammed Ali, also competed in the 1960 Rome Olympics, winning the light-heavyweight boxing title. For Clay, Olympic participation revealed the hypocrisy of American society at that time. At the Olympics his victory was widely celebrated, but when he returned home to Louisville in Kentucky (the Olympic medal in pride of place round his neck), he recalls being ordered out by the owner of a restaurant, where once outside he was followed by a gang of white men who attacked him. Clay was so frustrated that he drove to a bridge over the Ohio River and dropped his Olympic gold medal into the water (Bunch and Robinson, 1985: 49). Cassius Clay changed his name to Mohammed Ali in 1964 after joining the Nation of Islam, a radical group which endorsed separatism between black and white people (Wiggins, 1997: 152). Ali was active in speaking out against the oppression of black people in the USA. Furthermore, when the U.S. Army attempted to draft him into fighting in the Vietnam War, he declared himself a conscientious objector, famously saying: ‘I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong’, adding ‘no Viet Cong ever called me a nigger’ (Sexton, 2006: 253). Ali was one of many minority black athletes who were only too aware of the inequalities and prejudice embedded within American society.
By 1960, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA was already well under way. From the 1950s onwards, black Americans were increasingly active and organised in addressing the injustice of American society: the segregation of black and white; the discrimination black Americans faced in employment and housing; the disenfranchisement of black people on electoral registers and the widespread violence and prejudice they were forced to endure. Rosa Parks is popularly remembered as beginning the movement, having refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in 1955, although other incidences of this kind had occurred previously. Until the mid-1960s, the movement was predominantly non-violent, led by Martin Luther-King, the protests including bus boycotts, sit-ins and marches. The movement did achieve some breakthroughs: segregation was diminishing and black Americans were slowly obtaining more voting rights. However, a growing minority felt this did not sufficiently address the depth of racial inequality, and the more radical Black Power Movement developed, exacerbated by Luther King’s assassination in April 1968.

By the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the Civil Rights movement in America had reached a critical point. There was talk about black athletes in the USA team boycotting the event, encouraged by Harry Edwards, an instructor at San Jose State College. Edwards set up the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) which attempted to encourage black athletes to boycott the Games, in 1968 he argued in the Saturday Evening Post:

> The Olympic boycotters are not sacrificing their opportunity for gold medals just to dramatise the plight of their non-athletic blood brothers…They are dramatising the hypocrisy of their own situation as well. Black athletes are beginning to realise that breaking records doesn’t alter their own status as second-class citizens outside the sports arena.

(cited in Bunch and Robinson, 1985: 44).

The boycott failed to achieve broad support, and a number of black athletes travelled to Mexico in the autumn of 1968 as part of the USA team. There was, however, a sense of unrest within the team, particularly amongst the black members, including the track and field competitors Lee Evans, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, all of whom had originally contemplated a boycott. Smith and Carlos were both competing in the 200m sprint, Smith came first, winning gold, and Carlos came third, winning bronze. When they went to collect their medals on the podium, both athletes were shoe-less, to symbolise black poverty in America, both also wore black socks; Smith wore a black scarf and Carlos black beads around his neck (Bass, 2002: 240). They collected their awards and mounted the podium and when the Star Spangled Banner began to play, they bowed their heads and Smith raised his right arm, Carlos his left, to form a Black Power salute, each revealing a black glove in his raised hand. Peter Norman, the white Australian athlete who had won silver in the race, was also wearing an OPHR badge to demonstrate his support for their cause. The audience were shocked, and the athletes were bundled off the field to the sound of some cheers of support, but mainly booing and angry shouts.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was furious, arguing that politics should not be part of the Olympic Games, and promptly expelled Smith and Carlos from the Olympic Village (Witherspoon, 2008: 132).

This simple and dignified act dominated the media’s coverage of the games. Black Power salutes were made subsequently by other members of the USA team, black berets and socks were worn, and some winners dedicated their medals to Smith and Carlos (Witherspoon, 2008: 133). Yet, Smith, Carlos and their families received death threats and were ostracised from the sporting community (Smith, 2007: 35; Witherspoon, 2008:
Nevertheless, their statement was effective and the image of the two men has become iconic. Smith and Carlos drew attention to the hypocrisy of white America, which celebrated the sporting triumphs of black athletes, yet also treated them with contempt in ordinary life. As Tommie Smith articulated at a press conference following the protest:

If I win, I am an American, not a black American... But if I did something bad, then they would say I am a Negro. We are black and we are proud of being black...
Black America will understand what we did tonight.
(Allen, 1968: 12c)

The Black Power Salute undoubtedly cemented the relationship between the Olympic Games and the politics of race and racial discrimination.

BLACK BRITISH OLYMPIC ATHLETES SINCE 1980

In the last thirty years there have been several prominent black British athletes who have been exceptionally successful in the Olympic arena. For example, Daley Thompson was awarded the gold medal twice for the decathlon event at Moscow in 1980, and Los Angeles in 1984. Although Thompson’s father was originally from Nigeria, he has said he has never considered himself ‘black’, and has argued that the colour of his skin was not relevant to his sporting identity (Cashmore, 1982: 135). Although he has generally dismissed race and ethnicity as being issues in the Olympic environment, more recently he has argued that whilst he did not consider himself different, ‘that isn’t to say things haven’t happened to me that wouldn’t have happened if I wasn’t black’ (Chalmers, 2008). Thompson could perhaps be alluding to the lack of endorsement deals he received at the peak of his career, his exclusion from further Olympic involvement such as coaching or organising and/or being overlooked in a recent poll of the best six British Olympians (Chalmers, 2008). One might suggest that Thompson felt that he was the victim of the embedded social stereotype that black men can be ‘reckless’ or ‘difficult' and thus are unlikely to be trusted with significant advertising campaigns and/or within management roles. This can be seen as yet another example of the way in which black men can be ‘othered’ as irresponsible and/or dangerous, and has been widely written about by theorists of ‘race’ and racial prejudice (Hylton, 2009: 88).

Linford Christie, a British athlete of Jamaican heritage, is famous for his many successes in the 100m sprint, running the distance in 9.96 seconds at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 and winning gold at the age of 32 (Guttmann, 2002: 184). It is clear from his testimonies that Christie feels he has been discriminated against because of his race. He finds evidence for this in his exclusion from Great Britain’s torch bearing event for the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and feels he has been barred from any involvement in the forthcoming 2012 London Olympics (On the Ropes, 2008). Christie has accused Sebastian Coe (a former Olympic team mate, now chair of The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games), of making a ‘racial slur’ against him (ibid., 2008). Christie was referring to Coe’s Daily Telegraph column in 2001, in which Coe accuses Christie of ‘boorish’ behaviour throughout his Olympic career, describing one team meeting in which ‘he made himself deliberately unintelligible to all but those who had a passing knowledge of jive’ (Coe, 2001). Furthermore, in a Radio Four interview in 2008, Christie said he thought there was undoubtedly institutionalised racism in Britain, arguing ‘how many black knights from British athletics do you know?’ (On the Ropes, 2008). It is important to note that this issue is made all the more complex by the fact that Christie failed a drugs test in 1999. He was found positive for
the banned substance nandrolone and was subsequently banned from competing for two years. Indeed, the British Olympics Association ruled that Christie would not be accredited for any Olympic Games in the future. Christie has always denied taking performance-enhancing drugs, but the ban does go someway to explain his exclusion from the Olympic environment. Christie’s testimony and experiences help demonstrate the intricate issues that surround racial discrimination within the Olympic arena.

Black female British Olympians have generally been seen as less likely to highlight problems of racial discrimination and have found it easier to feel accepted within their home country. Three examples are: Denise Lewis, Kelly Holmes and Christine Ohuruogu. Denise Lewis received a gold medal for the heptathlon event at Sydney in 2000, and in the same year was awarded a MBE. Kelly Holmes famously won two gold medals at Athens in 2004, and was in 2005 awarded an OBE to become Dame Kelly Holmes. Christine Ohuruogu, despite receiving a one year ban for failing to appear at three consecutive drug tests on 2006, went on to win gold in the 400m event at Beijing in 2008. Ohuruogu’s achievement was recognised in 2009 when she was given in MBE. Jackie Agyepong, a British hurdler who competed in the 1992 Barcelona and 1996 Atlanta Olympics, has said she feels that her race was less significant in athletics than her gender. Agyepong does however also say she would like to be seen as a positive role model for the black community (Agyepong, 1997). In this example, gender is constructed as a more important limiting factor than ‘race’, perhaps because the stereotypes of black women are somehow disconnected from the field of sport.

Nevertheless, some black female athletes have felt they have been ignored in terms of sponsorship, endorsement deals and media attention. In general, the female athlete is more likely to be viewed in terms of sexual attractiveness than the male athlete. A young and pretty female athlete is in a better position to court the media, regardless of her actual athletic performance (Ismond, 2003: 140). However, here too ‘race’ may also be a barrier, as some black female athletes have suggested that they feel ‘less marketable’ than white female athletes. For example, Joice Maduaka, a sprinter who competed in both Sydney and Athens, has argued that because of her race she has been overlooked in terms of publicity: ‘if I had blond hair and blue eyes they would love me’ (Ismond, 2003: 151). In this sense, although black female athletes are perhaps not subject to the same kind of stereotyping as black male athletes, there are other potential hindrances which can limit their overall success and the extent to which they are able to capitalise upon their sporting achievements.

CHALLENGING PERVERSIVE STEREOTYPES

Black athletes are continually confronted with complex stereotyping and subtle forms of prejudice. In the media, black athletes are often described as being predisposed to athleticism, with ‘natural’ dispositions towards strength and speed. This language implies that excellence in the athletics field is ‘natural’ to those with an African heritage, a view that has been and is supported by some scientists and social scientists (Rushton, 1995; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Entine, 2000). This perception can be damaging for a number of reasons. The assumption that athleticism is innate to those with black skin could be seen to imply that athletic accomplishments by black people are achieved almost effortlessly. On the other hand, white athletes (who are allegedly less ‘naturally’ athletic) are celebrated for the ‘hard work’ required to complete with black athletes. These distinctions and questions of their biological basis continue to be subject to much debate.
In 1999, the Australian sports media fabricated a rivalry between Linford Christie and Matt Shirvington, a young white sprinter who they dubbed as ‘the great white hope’. Their suggestion was that they had finally found a white sprinter good and ambitious enough to compete against black athletes. Christie was apparently so frustrated with the creation of this false rivalry and its racist undertones that he came out of retirement to run the race (Hylton, 2009: 85). In 2000, an article in the New Statesmen entitled ‘Why black will beat white at the Olympics’, argues that if we fail to accept that there are physical characteristics which make those of African descent superior athletes, we are ‘simply leaving the terrain open to the likes of Rushton, Murray and Entine’, whose work has been described as ‘scientific racism’ (Malik, 2000).

In addition, it has been argued that sports commentators are more likely to describe black athletes as ‘natural’ and ‘graceful’, and white athletes as conscientious and hard-working (Hylton, 2009: 83). Whilst some black athletes have challenged these perceptions, some also express that their African heritage has given them an edge over their white competitors. 2008 Olympic sprint finalist Jeanette Kwakye (who is British born with Ghanaian parents) when asked whether or not she felt her Ghanaian heritage had contributed to her running talent, answered:

I think my West African heritage has had a massive role in my talent. I believe there are studies showing scientific evidence that people of West African ancestry have a major advantage in power sports like mine, hence the abundance of black sprinters at the highest level (Kwakye, 2008).

It is therefore evident that not every black athlete feels a victim of racial stereotyping and also that some do draw positively from the idea that there may be ethnic differences in dispositions towards athleticism.

The focus on this naturalised disposition for athleticism (in particular in track and field events) has not only the power to diminish the significance of black athletes' achievements but has also been used to propagate the notion that black people are not 'suited' to intellectual pursuits. This racist stereotyping has fed the perception that if you are black and a minority, one of the few avenues of achieving status and success is through sport. This may be seen as connected to the processes which produce successful black athletes as positive role-models for the black community (against a dearth of publicity for black role-models in other public roles). Indeed, athletics can be perceived to be a route to success for members of a minority black population, who are often amongst the most socially disadvantaged. This has the potential to encourage young black people (perhaps boys in particular) to follow non-academic routes to success through sporting achievements. Indeed, it is worth considering that young black men are currently amongst the groups least likely to be represented amongst the undergraduate student population in the UK.

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1 For example, an analysis of the 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation for England and 2001 Census data showed that Black and Black African groups make up ‘approximately two and a half times as high a proportion of the population as a whole in the most deprived areas of England as a whole’ (Tinsley & Jacobs, 2006)

2 Percentages derived from the HESA show that in the academic year 2006-2007, black male students represented 2% of the total first-year undergraduate population. More information can
In addition, some athletes feel that the emphasis on their ‘natural’ abilities has impacted on their careers to the extent that when they retire from competitive athletics, they find it difficult to obtain jobs in sports management, as their skills are thought to be physical rather than intellectual and strategic (Ismond, 2003: xv). Black athletes are sometimes even pigeonholed into certain types of athleticism, primarily sprinting and other track and field events (Ismond, 2003: xvi). This may account for the fact that there was considerable surprise when in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Cullen Jones became the first African-American to win gold at a swimming event (the 4 x 100m freestyle relay) (Goodbody, 2008). The emphasis on black athletes’ ‘natural’ abilities can therefore have negative implications and outcomes.

**SUMMARY**

The sporting success of minority black athletes is in many ways a positive story. The environment of the Olympic Games was one in which black athletes were able to excel, despite the inequalities which existed within society more generally. The Olympics has therefore been seen by many as a means of overcoming adversity and racial discrimination, in particular through nationalised celebration of black athletes’ triumphs. At the same time, the Olympics has also been used as a stage for protest against racial prejudice and discrimination, demonstrating the global environment of the Olympics is not always harmonious in terms of ‘race’. Even recently, athletes have expressed concern that racial discrimination is still prevalent within athletics, including the Olympics and its associated organisations. The focus on black athletes’ ‘natural’ athleticism by the media and sporting associations has produced a limited lens through which to access their achievements. It has perpetuated the myth that black people’s talent is exclusively physical rather than mental, which has perhaps led to the exclusion of former black athletes from managerial positions in sport. Furthermore this notion of black people as only successful within the athletic domain has the potential to skew the aspirations of young black people, such that they may be less likely to pursue other career or sporting avenues. At the same time, some black athletes have been able to draw positively from the notion that their heritage may give them a natural advantage in athletics. There continues to be much research and lively debate about this issue.

Recently, the first Chinese black athlete was called up to represent his country in the 2012 London Olympics. He is nineteen year old Ding Hui, nicknamed ‘Xiao Hei’ or ‘Little Black’, a volleyball player with a South African father and a Chinese mother. He has already received much attention from the Chinese media, who have noted that he has a ‘pleasant and perky nature’ and talent for ‘singing and dancing’. Furthermore, on several Chinese internet forums, the whiteness of his teeth has been commented on, as well as the ‘athleticism of his genes’. Some people do not even consider Ding Hui to be Chinese and have accused China of importing foreign athletes in order to improve their chances of winning gold in the Olympics (Moore, 2009). Thus, it is clear that whilst the presence of black minority athletes at the Olympics Games can be liberating and can contribute to addressing barriers of race, if society remains unequal and racism still prevalent, the problems of prejudice and racial discrimination cannot be eradicated from the games.

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