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[Home](#) > [Heritage](#) > Black Athletic Prowess: Nature or Nurture?

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Photo: US sprinter Maurice Green, one of the black athletes who will compete at the Sydney Olympics. Photo: Corbis Images

### Black Athletic Prowess: Nature or Nurture?

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At the Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, black athletes from all over the world will compete against the world's best. And if past Olympics are any indication, they will excel in a variety of events that blacks have historically dominated. While there is little denying black dominance in track, basketball, and boxing, for example, conflicting theories have been proposed to explain it.

For Carl Lewis, the gold-winning sprinter, the reason seems clear. "Blacks - - physically in many cases -- are made better," he once said. "We generally carry less fat, the athletes. I can look at [our bodies] and tell that. We have long levers. And those are the two things that help us sprint better."

Tennis champion Arthur Ashe was more ambivalent in accounting for black athletic prowess, but reached a similar conclusion. "The results are outstanding, nothing short of stellar," he wrote in his seminal book, *A Hard Road to Glory*, a history of African Americans in sports. "Sociology can't explain it. I want to hear from the scientists. Until I see some numbers, I have to believe that we blacks have something that gives us an edge."

"Damn it," he added, realizing the unsettling implications of his conclusion. "My heart says 'no,' but my mind says 'yes.'"

While some prominent black athletes have not hesitated to refer to their race to explain their excellence, historically the subject of black athletic aptitude has been a prickly issue that has gotten sportscasters fired and academics branded bigots. Throughout American slavery and the Jim Crow era, the idea of black physical superiority has been tethered to a belief in black intellectual inferiority -- a stereotype that still exists in American racial folklore.

This attitude has found ample expression in the American media. Appearing on *Nightline* in 1987 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the integration of baseball, for example, LA Dodgers executive Al Campanis spoke warmly of his late friend Jackie Robinson. Then, responding to anchor Ted Koppel's question on the paucity of blacks in baseball management, Campanis said blacks "may not have some of the necessities" to serve as managers or general managers. "Well, I don't say all of them, but they certainly are short in some areas," he explained. "How many quarterbacks do you have, how many pitchers do you have that are black?" Some days later, the LA Dodgers fired Campanis after 44 years of service.

Similarly, in another highly-publicized incident in January 1988, CBS's famed football broadcaster, Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder, told a television crew that a highly selective breeding process accounted for black success in sports. "The black is a better athlete because he's bred to be that way," he said. "During slave trading, the slave master would breed his big woman so that he would have a big black kid, see. That's where it all started." Snyder's remarks, made on Martin Luther King Day, caused an uproar and he was subsequently fired.

Snyder was essentially subscribing to what academics have called the "breeder theory," articulated most eloquently by black anthropologist William Montagne Cobb in 1939. "No other group of Americans in such large numbers has had to pass such rigorous tests of survival as has the Negro," wrote Cobb. "From this standpoint he is the most highly selected stock in America... physically strong, showing great endurance at strenuous labor under severe climactic and nutritional hardships and producing a disproportionately large number of champions in representative fields of athletics. The debate over black athleticism has historically pitted proponents of this "genetic/breeding" argument against those who underline cultural and socio-economic factors.

Berkeley sociologist Harry Edwards, a scholar and Black Power activist, is one notable proponent of the "socio-economic factors" argument. In 1971, *Sports Illustrated* published an article arguing that "slavery weeded out the weak," and that "there is an increasing body of scientific opinion which suggests that physical differences in the races might well have enhanced the athletic potential of the Negro in certain sports." Edwards responded with a blistering article titled, "The Myth of the Racially Superior Athlete."

"By asserting that blacks are physically superior, whites, at best, reinforce some old stereotype long held about African Americans -- to wit, that they are little removed from the apes in their evolutionary development," Edwards wrote. "It opens the door for at least an informal acceptance of the idea that whites are intellectually superior to blacks."

Because the debate has been so contentious, the topic of black athleticism has become a minefield that most public commentators have preferred to sidestep. Some critics see such wariness as hypocritical. "Few object when medical scientists talk about...the fact that blacks have a higher incidence of hypertension than whites and twice as many black males die

of diabetes and prostate cancer as white males," Malcolm Gladwell, a black Canadian critic, wrote in the *New Yorker*. "So why aren't we allowed to say that there might be athletically significant differences between blacks and whites?"

While few have dared to openly discuss this explosive topic in recent years, of late the gag order seems to be lifting, partly due to the publication of a well-researched and powerfully-argued book, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*. The author, John Entine, claims to have written the book "for those intrigued by one of the more remarkable phenomenon of our times -- the monumental success of the black athlete in defiance of considerable odds" -- a record of achievement, he argues, that cannot simply be explained by "a dearth of opportunities elsewhere." Instead, argues Entine, "The decisive variable is in our genes," and it is due to more than "cultural serendipity" that "Brazilians are time and time again the best soccer players, the Chinese among the best divers, black Dominicans among the best baseball players, and African Americans the top basketball and football players."

Entine blasts the "stereotype of the genetic see-saw with the physical ability on one end and smarts on the other" as an unfounded and quintessentially American cliché. The stereotype of the "dumb jock" is a "somewhat recent and very North American belief," he writes. "For much of modern history, physical and mental fitness were linked with a positive bias. The Greeks believed that physical fitness was essential to achieve a proper balance of mind and body...Moreover, a great deal of evidence suggests that in fact there is a positive relationship between physical and mental fitness."

Entine also calls "Africa is the mother-lode of the running world," and writes that "athletes from each region tend to excel in specific athletic events as a result of both cultural and genetic factors: West Africa is the ancestral home of the world's top sprinters and jumpers; North Africa turns out top middle distance runners; and East Africa is the world distance running capital... Whereas only one in every eight of the people in the world are black, more than 70 percent of the top times are held by runners of African origin."

Although Entine rejects the idea of black intellectual inferiority, Harry Edwards is unswayed by his argument. In a roundtable with Entine on *BET Tonight*, Edwards rejected the notion that blackness is an athletic advantage.

"Blacks do not dominate most sports," he said emphatically. "Blacks are concentrated in four or five sports -- literally, baseball, football, boxing and track -- and not even field, the hammer throw, the distance throw and so forth. The overwhelming majority of sports, over 95 percent, are dominated by whites. Why are we not talking about white athletic superiority in winter sports...or in swimming, or automobile racing, or horseracing, or golf, or tennis and so forth?" "Sports," explained Edwards, "is a very complicated social phenomenon...genetics [may matter] at the individual level, but collectively it [black over-representation in certain sports] has to do with a lack of alternative high prestige occupation opportunities which are comparably visible to sports."

Similarly, cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Race Rules*, disputes the "genetic advantage" thesis. "Once you buy into the genetic argument, you're heading down a slippery slope," said Dyson in a phone interview from Chicago. "If you buy that argument, you'll have to buy Charles Murray's argument too," he added, referring to the co-author of the infamous *The Bell Curve*, which argues that people of African descent statistically lag behind whites in intelligence.

"There's no question that black athletes have proven themselves to be superior in many instances," says Dyson, "but that's because they were given an opportunity. Before Joe Louis was allowed to fight, before Bill Russell was allowed to play in the NBA, before Jackie Robinson in baseball, they were closed out and shut out. They had their so-called Negro Leagues, but they were not allowed to test their talents against the best and brightest in white America. Once they were allowed to do that, they proved themselves capable of overcoming the odds and displaying their athletic prowess. There's no genetic explanation in and of itself. It's the genetics that have been reproduced as a result of the social practices that shape that genetic pool. The biology has been shaped by the sociology. So I would argue that the prowess of black athletes is directly in response to the demand of a white supremacist culture for black athletic achievement to be ingrained into that black culture. Therefore, the genetic selectivity of athletic activity became more pronounced. But see how it backfires: because to assume that black athletes, without work or discipline, are superior -- so that Michael Jordan didn't have to go to the gym earlier, Magic Johnson has to have natural skill, whereas Larry Bird is working hard -- that's ridiculous."

Bryan Burwell of HBO Sports and HoopsTV.com sees a genetic explanation for black athletic achievement as a gross oversimplification. "I don't recall anybody trying to figure out why Albert Einstein was brilliant," he says. "You fall into a dangerous trap when you play this game...There are no absolutes in figuring out athletic performance. There were a billion people before Michael Jordan who had his athletic ability. There's something at the level of personality. Tiger Woods destroys Entine's theory. He's not 'black' -- he's 'Cablasian.' He's good not just because he hits the ball far, but because he has worked hard to perfect his swing. He beats people on the green, that's not physical -- that's mental. Broad sweeping statements are usually wrong...and if there was a grand genetic lottery that we won, I must not have won the lottery ticket, because I was one of the most mediocre college athletes."

Michael Blakey, professor of anatomy and anthropology at Howard University and curator of the university's Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory, also fundamentally disagrees with Entine's thesis. "The idea fostered by *Taboo* denies that blacks used discipline and hard work even to achieve in the sports arena," he wrote in response to written questions. "Entine cites studies as supporting a racial basis for sports ability when in fact those studies show that fast twitch muscle fibers he associates with people of African descent increase through training and that early motor skills associated with blacks are the result of the necessary independence of young children in low income households, not racial biology."

And so, the debate rages on. Pushed by political winds and scientific evidence, the intellectual pendulum will continue to swing back and forth from "genetic" arguments to cultural and socio-economic explanations. And in Sydney, when a dozen muscular, dark-skinned sprinters line up in the blocks to compete in the 100-meter dash, the debate will no doubt continue.

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