

metabolic efficiency, reaction time, *and a slew of other characteristics.*" (emphasis added) He even writes that black babies are born after a shorter gestation

period and mature more quickly than white babies. He knows, all right.

Some day Americans will start saying what they really think about race. If

they can't yet talk about intelligence let them at least begin with sports. May *Taboo* sell and sell. **Ω**

Breaking Taboos in the Publishing Industry

The Struggle to Get *Taboo* Published.

by Jon Entine

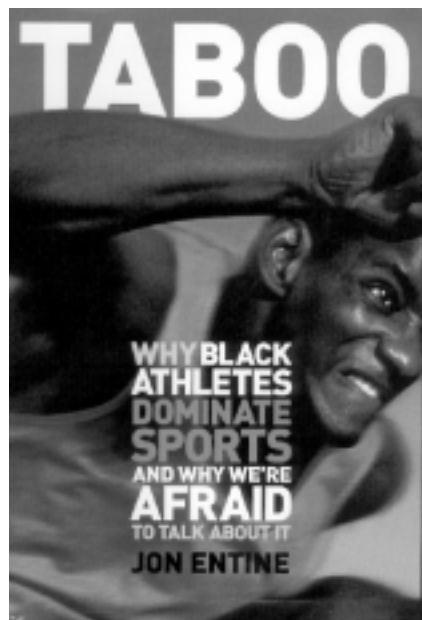
There are only 800 million blacks, or one in eight of the world population, but athletes of African origin hold every major world running record. Blacks make up 70 percent of the NFL and 85 percent of professional basketball. Even in sports in which blacks are not a majority—baseball, soccer, rugby, cricket, even bobsledding in some countries—blacks are represented in greater numbers than their share of the population. In my book, *Taboo*, I report the very uncontroversial scientific conclusion that environment and culture alone cannot explain this remarkable phenomenon.

"If you can believe that individuals of recent African ancestry are not genetically advantaged over those of European and Asian ancestry in certain athletic endeavors," observes Vincent Sarich, a renowned biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, "then you probably could be led to believe just about anything. But such dominance will never convince those whose minds are made up that genetics plays no role in shaping the racial patterns we see in sports. When we discuss issues such as race, it pushes buttons and the cortex just shuts down."

To the degree that it is a purely scientific debate, the evidence of black superiority in athletics is overwhelming, and decisively confirmed on the playing field. As equality of opportunity has increased in sports over the last 30 years, equality of results—the diversity of the races of the elite players—has declined. Greater opportunity has actually led to greater inequality.

Popular thinking—or at least what people are willing to say publicly—lags behind the genetic revolution, which has undercut the supposedly politically-comforting belief that all humans are created with equal potential. Evidence

spilling forth from the Human Genome Project shows that some functional characteristics do differentiate populations—most clearly in the proclivity to certain diseases and in athletic ability—although the classic racial trichotomy of sub-Saharan black/European white/Asian is indeed fuzzy around the edges. Genetically-linked, highly heritable characteristics such as skeletal structure, the dis-



tribution of muscle fiber types, reflex capabilities, metabolic efficiency, lung capacity, or the ability to use energy more efficiently are not evenly distributed across racial groups and cannot be explained by known environmental factors.

But don't expect a dispassionate public discussion about a subject that has become wholly political. Since World War II, anthropological orthodoxy has held that the very concept of race is a loaded, social construct. "People feel if you say blacks are better athletically, you're saying they're dumber," Frank Deford, the respected author and sports reporter once noted. "But when Jack Nicklaus sinks a 30-foot putt, nobody thinks his IQ goes down."

I should not have been surprised that my book would cause a brouhaha con-

sidering the rough going I faced a decade ago writing and producing an NBC documentary with Tom Brokaw, *Black Athletes: Fact and Fiction*. In 1988, Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder, a prognosticator with CBS Sports, had been fired and publicly ridiculed after making an off-handed comment that slave owners had bred blacks to produce the best physical specimens and that this contributed to black success in sports. Mr. Brokaw and I decided that maybe it was about time finally to address the issue openly.

The program provoked intense reaction and it divided public opinion, frequently along racial lines. A white columnist at *Newsday* called it "a step forward in the dialogue on race and sports" while a black writer at the same daily wrote that "NBC had scientists answer questions that none but a bigot would conjure up." "[Mr. Brokaw] utterly ignore[d] the facts in favor of the speculation of several scientists," charged Ralph Wiley in *Emerge* magazine. "His program played like a badly cast farce." Still, *Black Athletes* went on to win numerous awards including Best International Sports Film.

A few years after the documentary, at the urging of literary agent Basil Kane, I circulated a book proposal to publishers to explore the issue in more depth. The reactions were consistent: "By even suggesting that blacks may have a genetic edge in sports, you are opening up the Pandora's box of intellectual inferiority." In other words, great proposal, racist idea.

After more than a dozen rejections, an independent-minded editor at Macmillan, Rick Wolff, offered me a contract for what was to become *Taboo*. The turn of good fortune proved fleeting. Soon after, Mr. Wolff moved to Warner Books and though he wanted to take the book with him, Warner balked. "It was considered too dicey a subject," he recalls. "Once the other editors heard it was about racial differences, they wouldn't even let me present it at an editorial meeting."

I was stuck with writing the book for Mr. Wolf's eventual replacement as sports editor at Macmillan, Natalie Chapman, who knew nothing about the subject. Miss Chapman was encouraging when she reviewed the early manuscript, but then apparently got cold feet. Eight months later, she sent me the brush off. "Much of the manuscript is smoothly and elegantly written, and most of it is quite enjoyable to read. [But] while I admire the goals of the book, I must regretfully inform you that [it] lacks sufficient persuasiveness ... to avoid being torn apart by critics, reviewers, and readers."

Years of work on an important subject were suddenly in mortal danger. Basil, my agent, embarked on a full court press to find a new publisher. Again, most everyone was too frightened even to read it. Basic Books, a first-rate independent publisher affiliated with HarperCollins, wanted to do it until an African American consultant nixed the book as "potentially racist." One female editor lectured Basil for a half hour about how insensitive he was even to propose such an idea. Would she please read the book? "I don't have time for such trash," she replied.

That reaction was all the more infuriating given the lengths to which I went to bring different perspectives to the book. In recognition of the complexity of the issues in sociology, anthropology, and population genetics, I submitted the manuscript for review to a board of advisors and experts drawn from a range

of races, professional expertise, and countries. To a man and woman, they loved the book and thought it fair and provocative.

"You will be accused of spouting old fashioned racism for even raising the issue of African American superiority in athletics," wrote Earl Smith, Chairman of the Department of Sociology and Ethnic Studies at Wake Forest University, a leading black scholar and author of several books on race and sports, and one of my board members. "All this beating around the bush has to stop. This is a good book. I am quite excited with the arguments that are raised."

Dr. Smith's endorsement, along with reviews and letters of support from the editor of the *Journal of the African*

"Once the other editors heard it was about racial differences they wouldn't even let me present it."

American Male, the president of the Human Biology Association, Olympic Committee scientists, and top athletes didn't make a difference. When it comes to race, "the cortex shuts down." No one would give *Taboo* a chance.

The log jam broke when Geoff Shandler, an editor at PublicAffairs, another independent publisher, also affiliated with HarperCollins, read it and loved it. "I understand what you are trying to do with this book," he wrote. "We'd be honored to do it."

Even with a respected publisher behind the book, the hysteria continues. In early January, *The New York Times* magazine told me it was killing plans to publish an adaptation, calling it potentially "dangerous." "Our reluctant decision to drop the project is no reflection of my regard for your work, which remains high," wrote Kyle Crichton, an editor who had championed the article. "In brief, the whole subject worries my editor...." *ABC 20/20* also suddenly backed out of doing a story on *Taboo*. An executive explained that "higher management" got scared.

The book is now finally in the hands of the public. Will it be as skittish about the contents as the publishing industry? I doubt it. The African American community in particular has become irritated to the point of anger about the patronizing censorship and codes of silence that many journalists and institutions employ to "protect them." Science is a method of interrogating reality, a cumulative process of testing new and more refined explanations, not an assertion of dry, inalterable facts. It is a way of asking questions, not of imposing answers. I suspect American readers of all ideological and racial stripes are far more open to dispassionate inquiry than many "leaders" of American letters. **Ω**

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O Tempora, O Mores!

Rocking the Boat

Just when we thought the Soviet Union was gone for good, it reappears in the United States. Atlanta Braves relief pitcher, John Rocker, will undergo a psychological evaluation because he told *Sports Illustrated* that New York City is so full of foreigners it makes him feel like a stranger. He also said he doesn't like to share the subway with AIDS carriers and unwed mothers. After the shrink's report comes in, baseball commissioner Bud Selig will choose an appropriate punishment. It doesn't matter that Mr. Rocker, 25, has groveled piteously and insisted he is not "racist." He is now a dissident, and like Soviets

who doubted Communist orthodoxy, the only sane player in baseball has to have his head examined. (Ronald Blum, *Baseball Orders Rocker to Undergo Psychological Tests*, AP, Jan. 6, 2000.)

Professional sports are full of rapists, robbers, and all manner of thugs. Many players leave a trail of illegitimate children from coast to coast. But no one can remember anyone being ordered to have his head examined. George W. Bush is all for it for Mr. Rocker, of course. "The fellow said some incredibly offensive things," he explained. "He is a public person. And I appreciate them [the baseball authorities] trying to get the man help." (Bush Agrees With Rocker Decision, AP, Jan. 10, 2000)

No Nonsense in Lusaka

Dawson Lupunga is the Community Development Minister for the African nation of Zambia. He has vowed to rid the capital city Lusaka of blind beggars because they give visitors the "wrong impression." Mr. Lupunga singled out blind beggars as "work-shy." "Begging is easy," he says. "They don't sweat when they ask for money. They don't want to till the land. That is why they beg." He complains that the blind have been given too much freedom under what he calls the current regime of democratic rule. Mr.

