

The Price of “Black Dominance”

John Hoberman

The somber and determined face of a young black man stares out from a glossy magazine page while an equally resolute text lets us read his mind: “I can tolerate mistakes. But I cannot repeat them. I can grow.” This, of course, is how point guards and wide receivers must think to survive in the tough games they play. Suddenly the attentive eye catches a glimpse of the dress shirt and tie that are just visible at the bottom of the page, and cognitive dissonance sets in. For this positive thinker does not work for the National Football League (NFL) or the National Basketball Association (NBA). “I work for J.P. Morgan.” This black man competes in banking, not basketball.

Clever advertising ploys like this illustrate one kind of progress in our society’s unofficial and haphazard campaign to eliminate racial stereotyping from public spaces. For this well-dressed (and well-integrated) man represents the new entrepreneurial alternative to more familiar racial images—the sullen faces of black athletes we have seen looking tough and sweaty for the cameras that serve the marketing interests of athletic shoe companies and other sponsors. Any attentive observer of our advertising conventions will have noticed that basketballs and naked muscled torsos have long served as *de facto* signifiers of black masculinity for an audience that now includes almost anyone on earth. A few years ago, one black American long resident in Thailand sent me a letter in which he commented on the effects of this relentless barrage of black athletic images. Based on what their media showed them, he reported, South Asians had no reason to believe that African-American abilities extended beyond the world of sports.

While it is tempting to reply that Americans know better than that, given our knowledge of what black people have done in many fields of endeavor, our own domestic reality still resembles the global stage that presents NBA stars and other pop culture icons as representative African Americans. That is why relieving black men of the involuntary athletic identity that has been inflicted on them over the past one hundred years is part of the unfinished business that faces American society in the twenty-first century.

Many whites will doubt the harmful effects of such stereotyping. Athletes are, after all, celebrities, and black athletes seem to enjoy a prosperity and an *entrée* into white society that is denied to most African Americans. Such skepticism is characteristic of the white lack of interest in black realities that is probably the single most important factor in American race relations today. As displays of overt racism have become socially unacceptable, indifference to the special stresses black people experience has remained the adaptive strategy most whites employ to deal with persisting racial inequities. It is thus easy for whites to remain unaware of what some black psychologists call the “micro-aggressions” that are constantly being directed at people because they are black. The resulting emotional “microdisasters” occur in a variety of settings: universities, medical schools, law firms, and locker rooms among others. These typically unconscious assaults can include the ignorant ascribing of racial traits, and one of these traits is the “natural” athleticism that has been associated with African Americans for most of this century.

The widespread assumption that blacks are athletes by temperament and genetic endowment angers many African Americans who rightly expect others to recognize their complexity as human beings. I once witnessed an impromptu demonstration of this entirely justifiable resentment by a young black academic whose size and solid build told the entire world that he had once played football. Placing a small plastic football player on his shoulder, he moved out into a predominantly white audience, describing his predicament with some vehemence while jabbing a finger at this tiny simulacrum of the identity he could not escape despite his doctoral degree and excellent citizenship. Some years later, another young black professional told me the same story in a less dramatic fashion. Almost all the white people he met related to him first and foremost through his presumed athleticism, unaware of the emotional turmoil and fatigue that can build up in people (including physically imposing whites) who are exposed to constant stereotyping of this kind. The strain, this upbeat and personable man confessed, was enough to wear him down by the time he got home from the office, and this was an ordeal that never ended in a working environment that included only a handful of black colleagues.

If these professionals are among the best prepared to deal with the athleticizing of their identities, then what about the less sophisticated, and children in particular? For several generations, black children have come of age confronting social and professional horizons of opportunity that were almost always much narrower than those of their white counterparts. Athletes and entertainers have always been the most publicized African-American achievers. The enormous importance traditionally accorded to sports figures such as Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali clearly illustrates the disproportionate role athletic prowess has played in shaping African-American identity in the twentieth century.

The essayist Gerald Early, for example, sees the black fighter as a symbol of "what it means to be a black American." "One could argue," he adds, "that the three most important black figures in twentieth-century American culture were prizefighters: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali." This view finds support in a once-influential work of social science such as *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro* (1951). As the psychoanalysts Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey listened to their black patients, they could observe the special role athletic heroes played in the minds of people whose lives had been deformed

by a racial caste system. "Until recently," they wrote, "the Negro has had no real culture heroes with whom he could identify." They also concluded that athletes did not stimulate in black people the feelings of hostility and envy that could be directed at other black high achievers who had distinguished themselves in an academic setting. Whereas Joe Louis, Lena Horne, and Jackie Robinson could be "accepted by most Negroes as common ideal figures," the "educated Negro technician" occupied a tenuous position located somewhere between his fellow blacks and the dominant whites.

This oppositional relationship between black athletic and academic achievement has persisted during the age of "black dominance" in the sports world that began in the 1960s. One difference between the age of segregation and the post-Civil Rights era is that, during the later period, dreams of athletic stardom have induced many black children to reject educational opportunities that simply did not exist for those who grew up idolizing Jackie Robinson during the 1940s and 1950s.

Today, over-identification with athletes and the world of physical performances limits the development of black children by discouraging academic achievement in favor of physical self-expression, which many blacks as well as whites consider a racial trait. Some educators understand that the self-absorbed style promoted by glamorous black athletes subverts intellectual development. For that reason, a school for black boys in Chicago several years ago adopted a policy of stylistic abstinence: "No gum-chewing is allowed. No sagging pants. No sunglasses, biker pants or tank tops. No earrings worn by boys. No designs carved in the hair"—in short, a complete repudiation of the showy male style flaunted by many black stars. Such policies aim at mitigating an intense peer pressure that equates academic excellence with effeminacy and racial disloyalty and identifies "blackness" with physical prowess.

What is to be done about the influence of athletes and rappers whose high-profile careers tell black children to act out but not to "act white" by finding satisfaction in academic achievement? While some black professionals have lamented the effects of this syndrome throughout the period of "black dominance," their protests have been generally lost in the din of a media-driven sports world that manipulates the images of black athletic stars for the benefit of television networks and corporate sponsors. A sensationalized black male style has become incarnated in the fusion of black athletes, rappers, and criminals into a single menacing figure who offends many blacks as well as whites.

The constant, haunting presence of this composite masculine type is maintained by news coverage and advertising strategies that exploit the suggestive mixture of black anger and physical prowess that often suffuses each of these roles. For rap music, as the black feminist Trisha Rose once pointed out, "is basically the locker room with a beat"—a perfect fusion of the rhythm and athleticism that are found in so many folkloric images of blackness. Today sports stars and rap stars share a celebrity that is intensified by their reciprocal relationships. Shaquille O'Neal is both a symbol of black physical domination in the NBA and a highly publicized rap singer. Rappers, in turn, may brag about their physical prowess or, like many athletes, make their own contributions to the "violence-prone" image of the black male. The continuing symbolic potency of black physical violence directed against white authority provoked a national psychodrama in 1997 when Latrell Sprewell, now of the New York Knicks, attacked his haranguing white coach.

More recently, it was the rap star Sean (Puffy) Combs who was sentenced to a day of "anger management" for beating a music producer with whom he had a disagreement. The late-capitalist irony of such assaults is that Jim Crow intolerance of uppity blacks has been replaced by the marketers' appreciation of how notorious black males can serve as advertising vehicles for their products. In one sense, this commercially motivated tolerance represents a remarkable de-escalation of racial hostility toward black men. At the same time, we may assume that there is a social cost attached to the legitimizing of such people as de facto role models for impressionable young people.

The influence of this stylized "ghetto" blackness crosses the boundaries of both class and race, creating adolescent "wannabes" of both colors. But the consequences of dysfunctional role models are more serious for young blacks. "Too many affluent black youths," the black psychiatrist James Comer said in 1978, "mistakenly associate black identity with what is most self-destructive about the behavior of blacks with lower income." A generation ago some black professionals were also campaigning against violent "blaxploitation" films. Today black parents confront a sports world in which some of the most celebrated black representatives no longer present a clear alternative to the violent, narcissistic, and antisocial norms glamorized in *Superfly* and other black action films of the 1970s.

"How do you end some of the traditions that have become dysfunctional for the black male, like the idea that he has to behave in certain unacceptable ways to

be 'cool' or 'hip'?" asks the black psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, especially when "in nearly every other way but sex and physical brawn, the black male is impotent institutionally in our society." As Poussaint noted many years ago, one of the consequences of identification with physical prowess "has been the contempt in which many young blacks hold their peers who have opted for success in more sedate activities." Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, who have done pioneering work on the academic self-destruction of black children, have warned that "the black community must reexamine its own perceptions and interpretations of school learning. Apparently, black children's general perception that academic pursuit is 'acting white' is learned in the black community."

In *The Content of Our Character* (1991), Shelby Steele's best-selling treatise on the emotional complexities of the African-American psyche, the author sees the focus on athletic achievement as a self-defeating defensive strategy, a way of staving off self-doubts that are continually being generated by academic failure. "Across the country thousands of young black males take every opportunity and make every effort to reach the elite ranks of the NBA or NFL," Steele writes. "But in the classroom, where racial vulnerability is a hidden terror, they and many of their classmates put forth the meagerest effort and show a virtual indifference to the genuine opportunity that is education." Steele regards athleticism of this kind as an example of "compensatory grandiosity," even including "the magnificent egotism of a Muhammad Ali." He refuses to romanticize the black body, and he insists on recognizing the pathos that always lurked inside the doggerel and the exhibitionist swagger of a popular black hero like Ali.

Nor is this behavior specifically African-American, since it is observed in other countries as well as in the United States. R. Patrick Solomon's *Black Resistance in High School* (1992) describes what he saw in a Canadian setting: "Embracing the school curriculum and such attendant activities as speaking standard English, spending a lot of time in the library, working hard to get good grades, and being on time were perceived as 'acting white.' Here again, black students who engaged in academic pursuits were labeled 'brainiacs' and were alienated, ostracized, or even physically assaulted by militant blacks." In a similar vein, Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, once a leading South African anti-apartheid activist and now vice chancellor of the University of Capetown, offered the following observation in 1997: "I find it interesting that we [blacks] are comfortable with sporting victories. We

have only the best people representing us when it comes to those things. But not to when it comes to matters intellectual." But how could it be otherwise, given that an emphasis on the physicality of black people remains one of the enduring legacies of European colonialism?

The neocolonial logic of "black dominance" in the service of white-owned enterprises has been noted by a number of African-American observers. The idea that African Americans are over-invested in sport was first promoted during the modern period by the black sports activist and sociologist Harry Edwards a quarter-century ago. "Far from being a positive force in the development of the black masses," he wrote in 1973, "integrated big-time sport in its present form is perhaps a negative influence." "Sports provide the black fan with the illusion of spiritual reinforcement in his own life struggles." "Athletics, then, stifles the pursuit of rational alternatives by black people." Fifteen years later Edwards continued to make the case against this social trap: "Black families are four times more likely than White families to push their children toward sports-career aspirations—often to the neglect and detriment of other critically important areas of personal and cultural development." In 1992 Edwards was still writing of "an exaggerated and inordinate [Black] social and cultural emphasis upon sports achievement as a social and economic mobility vehicle." More recently, he has described the social circumstances of many young black men as so desperate that "exploiting black youths' overemphasis on sports participation and achievement may be our only remaining avenue" for educating and integrating them into American society.

In 1993 a black senior admissions officer at Harvard addressed the same topic:

Unfortunately, TV images of black males are not particularly diverse. Their usual roles are to display physical prowess, sing, dance, play a musical instrument or make an audience laugh. These roles are enticing and generously rewarded. But the reality is that success comes to only a few extraordinarily gifted performers or athletes.... Millions see these televised roles as a definition of black men. Nowhere is this more misleading than in the inner city, where young males see it as the way out.... This powerful medium [television] has made the glamour of millionaire boxers, ballplayers, musicians and comedians appear so close, so tangible that, to naive young boys, it seems only a dribble or a dance step away. In

the hot glare of such surrealism, schoolwork and prudent personal behavior can become irrelevant.

In 1994 *Emerge* magazine published a commentary by a young African-American man on the effects of televising endless images of black athletes: "The public is fed these images constantly. Both black and white children are fed the same images, but white children do not accept black role models at the same rate as do black children. Young blacks aspire to the images the media projects, wherein their mentors appear most. Whites need not worry because their image will never be tarnished by television, nor any other form of media."

In 1997 Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society reported that 66% of African-American boys between the ages of 13 and 18 believed that they were capable of supporting themselves as professional athletes. The prominent black psychiatrist and social activist Alvin Poussaint, a professor at Harvard Medical School, commented as follows: "There is an overemphasis on sports in the black community, and too many black students are putting all their eggs in one basket."

African-American doubts about the social utility of sport have never been as influential as the belief that black athletic achievement could advance racial justice and undermine racial prejudice. Often invoked but seldom examined, this faith in the black athlete as a politically invaluable role model and social resource became one of the ruling dogmas of American thinking about race and social progress and was eventually incarnated in the mythic person of Jackie Robinson. This faith in the social value of athletic achievement has been sustained by the persisting economic and educational disparities that separate African Americans from other ethnic groups in the United States. In a society where the net worth of the average black household is one-tenth that of its white counterpart, it is only natural that black parents and their children should vest disproportionate hopes in the sports entertainment industry's ability to provide for the athletic talent that sustains it. Nor are politically sophisticated people immune to the lure of this siren song. "We believe," Jesse Jackson wrote in 1993, "that sports can help change the despair in our communities into hope, replace low esteem with confidence and rebuild a true sense of community that transcends neighborhood and racial boundaries."

This declaration, for all its good intentions, revealed a striking lack of historical perspective. Here, at the

end of the twentieth century, Jesse Jackson was invoking the millennial hopes for sport that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had proclaimed back in the 1920s and 1930s. Had the passage of most of a century not demonstrated what African Americans' engagement with sports could and could not do for them at different phases of their social development? Until the postwar period, racist restrictions on the education, professional training, and military service of African Americans had made athletes superlative examples of black achievement and qualities of character whites doubted they possessed.

Yet this emphasis on physical prowess also signified the underdevelopment of a people whose future prospects could not be built on the power of muscles. To be sure, what black athletic heroes such as Joe Louis and Jesse Owens did for African-American morale during the Jim Crow era should never be underestimated. But the social value of such performances during the subsequent era of integration has frequently been overestimated, and especially regarding the black stars of the 1990s. Young black athletes, Jesse Jackson said in 1995, "create a tremendous industrial base for black America. We cannot just settle for the pleasure of watching them perform." While the second of these assertions strikes me as correct, the first is inflated in the traditional fashion and overlooks the modern athlete's disconnect from social action of any kind apart from innocuous public service announcements. "You have athletes making absurd amounts of money, but why aren't they doing great things with it?" a reporter asked Charles Barkley of the NBA last year. The comment annoyed him, he said, because it was true. When Jayson Williams of the New York Nets announced a donation of \$2.1 million to St. John's University at the end of 1999, this was apparently the second largest donation ever made to a university by any professional athlete.

Few statistics could convey as well as this one the sheer disinterest of black athletes in promoting social development, given that they earn an aggregate of around \$1 billion a year. While that hardly constitutes an industrial base, Jesse Jackson is surely right to suggest that this group of black millionaires could do a lot more for their community. There are many black athletes, for example, who could have bailed out the NAACP when it faced bankruptcy a few years ago. The fact that not one of them responded to this nationally publicized financial emergency is one index of the

decline of the black athlete as a significant actor on the stage of American race relations.

So which social or political roles are appropriate for the black athletic stars of the 1990s and beyond? Where are the barriers they might breach on behalf of racial progress? Who are the inheritors of Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali? The absence of such sports figures is one result of the commercialization of the black athlete over the past generation. Whereas Jackie Robinson faced a society that did not want him, fifty years later Michael Jordan confronted an advertising market that could not get enough of him. His apolitical status came to be taken for granted as the entirely sensible price of a commercial operation that netted \$50,000,000 a year on the basis of his cross-over appeal. His domestication for white audiences was definitively certified by a film in which he engaged in comical colloquies with familiar cartoon characters. As the late Arthur Ashe once pointed out, "advertisers want somebody who's politically neutered."

For the black athlete who refuses political neutering, the American sports world is a difficult venue in which to offer African-American analysis or promote an African-American agenda. The newspapers, networks and magazines that have a stake in the financial health of professional and collegiate sports operations tend to censor or downplay the existence of racial inequities or conflicts. While the addition of black sports-writers has led to more accurate coverage of racial situations, their more numerous white colleagues will frequently spin certain stories and just sit on others. When Latrell Sprewell choked his coach in 1997 it produced an orgy of publicity that played to every negative stereotype about black men. When a white NFL linebacker named Kevin Greene attacked his coach in 1998 during a game it was treated as a minor incident, because white anger and black anger are socially constructed in different ways. When *Sports Illustrated* published a roundtable discussion of the state of the NFL in 1999, neither black participant would accuse the league of systemic racism despite a reluctance to hire black coaches that has become obvious to the point of farce.

Black athletes who offer more aggressive analysis of the racial balance of power are generally portrayed as hotheads. Black anger can always be dismissed as the sort of emotional volatility that disqualifies the critic. An interesting case of this kind erupted in November 1998 when Bryan Cox, a New York Jets linebacker known for his temper, was fined for unnecessary roughness during a game. In the course of this widely covered contro-

versy Cox made the following points: the few blacks granted administrative authority are always enlisted to discipline black players; the NFL does not donate money collected from fines to any black charities. Previously, Cox had sued the league for not providing a “workplace environment free from racial harassment” after he was showered with racial epithets (and batteries) from the stands. This action secured an agreement from the NFL that it would eject fans who engaged in racist behavior. Let the reader decide whether Cox’s accusations of racism against the league deserved to be portrayed in the press as nothing more than his latest tantrum.

Black athletes can also endure more grotesque demonstrations of white officials’ indifference to the welfare of African Americans. Consider, for example, what happened to Oliver Miller of the Sacramento Kings on February 9, 1999, when his team played a game in Phoenix against the Suns. In the words of the *New York Times* columnist Harvey Araton:

In front of a sellout crowd that included his in-laws and children, Miller was cruelly parodied by a court jester in a gorilla suit. The Suns’ long-time mascot stuffed a tube under his costume to dramatically increase his girth, donned a Miller jersey, pretended to gorge himself on popcorn and then fell to the floor, unable to get up. It would have been bad enough had the Suns’ mascot been a duck deliberately humiliating a man who has struggled visibly, painfully, with an eating disorder. [The players’ union director Billy] Hunter looked at the tape of an overwhelmingly white crowd whooping it up over the depiction of a troubled black player as a “fat, lazy ape” and, with good reason, saw something worse.

The NBA management responded to this shameful spectacle by doing nothing. The public humiliation of Oliver Miller exemplifies the latent “coon show” dimension of sport in an age of “black dominance” and white audiences. In fact, Miller’s ordeal was only one in a series of comic-racist celebrations of the obese black athlete that appeared during the 1990s. A decade ago white sportswriters and their readers were whooping it up over William (The Refrigerator) Perry of the Chicago Bears. *Sports Illustrated* has published an entire series of such entertainment in recent years. Here is Dwayne (Road Grader) White of the St. Louis Cardinals, his dark face averted from the camera as his belly bulges obscenely over an invisible belt. In

another photograph Dan (Big Daddy) Wilkinson sits before a heaping plate of food, his large fists grasping an enormous wooden fork and matching spoon, which he holds erect like an African chief posing for *National Geographic*. Such uncensored displays of white complexes about black bodies raise profound questions about the purported social benefits of racially integrated entertainment. For if the instincts of nineteenth-century racial anthropologists can coexist easily with twenty-first century appetites for black entertainment, why should we believe that black athletes or black actors are teaching white audiences anything about the full complexity of black human beings?

The argument for integrated sport has always been that interracial teams and competitions promote better race relations. There is undoubtedly some truth to this claim, even if the social benefits can be difficult to confirm. The problem is that traditional ideas about the innocence and simplicity of the sports world have inflated its significance as an engine of social progress beyond anything we can confirm in an empirical way. In addition, the urgent need to find favorable signs and portents about where our racial predicament is heading has produced an untested theory of crossover effects that seizes on any black performer who can attract a white audience.

The critic Martha Bayles once pointed to “the simple fact that whites can genuinely appreciate black cultural styles without necessarily acquiring new sympathy or liking for their black fellow citizens.” This is an arresting thought precisely because we find it difficult to see black performances as unrelated to the forward or backward progress of race relations. “It is a powerful myth,” Bayles notes, “shared by many performers, which decrees that widespread white acceptance of a black act can mean only one of two things: either the act is a coon show, or another breakthrough has occurred in American race relations.” Even the young monologist and actor Danny Hoch, whose eager multiculturalism is the whole point of his performances, has acknowledged that theater is not the instrument of social engineering he might have wished it could be. Growing up in multicultural New York, he experienced hip-hop as “a common language that people could relate to.” But hip-hop, he now says of his chosen medium, “is a cultural unifier, not a social unifier.” Racial integration, it turns out, requires more than turning on a video or a CD player.

But what *is* racial integration? Surely it is a more profound sense of community and rapport than occurs at an “integrated” public venue such as a stadium or a

restaurant or a nightclub or even a classroom. In fact, racial integration in this deeper sense involves both our biological and cultural imaginations. The formation of social consciousness in Western societies has long included a racial typology that posits blacks and whites as polar opposites who differ both biologically and culturally. Only half a century ago discussion of such differences, both real and imagined, was accepted and quite uninhibited. As African Americans gained greater status and respect after the Second World War, the crudest and most ignorant assertions and speculations about racial differences were either discredited by more accurate information or entered into a state of suspended animation in which they could not be challenged by better informed ideas about race.

There is still a lot of such racial material floating around in peoples' heads, passed on from one generation to the next, because Western societies have done little to remove it. When, for example, the golfer Jack Nicklaus told an interviewer in 1994 that blacks were anatomically unsuited to play golf because they "have different muscles that react in different ways," he was invoking an eccentric racial biology of whose origins he was certainly unaware. In fact, the certainty with which he offered this fantasy was directly proportional to his indifference to where it had come from. It was simply and intuitively a fact about race. In a similar vein, I have heard people with no scientific training repeat mistaken dogmas about the bones and tendons of the "black" foot that supposedly give African-American sprinters their extra speed. These ideas appeared, and were discredited, during the 1930s. Yet there they were, like ancient dragonflies preserved in amber, floating out of brains that had somehow preserved them until the end of the twentieth century.

Racially integrated sport has preserved such racial folklore by giving the racial anthropology of the nineteenth century a new lease on life. The domination of various athletic events by specific ethnic or racial groups has promoted ideas about racial athletic aptitude throughout the twentieth century. Once upon a time the long-distance races were a specialty of the "stoic" Finns. Today it is darker-skinned stoics from North and East Africa. Nor is the racial folklore of sport a monopoly of the whites who have lost so much ground to fitter and darker competitors over the past generation. Black people absorb racial folklore with an efficiency that equals or exceeds that of whites, given their special emotional investment in athletic achievement and their awareness of the physical traumas endured by their ancestors. The notion that Afri-

can Americans are the robust issue of breeding experiments has thus served the fantasy needs of blacks and whites alike. "We were simply bred for physical qualities," the Olympic champion sprinter Lee Evans said in 1971. Many other black athletes, as well as better-educated black men, have embraced the same eugenic myth. "Slavery," a black physician told the African-American medical association in 1962, "was the greatest biological experiment of all times. Slavery began with the trip to America, during which all of the weak ones were killed or thrown overboard or allowed to die. This was followed by the slave block, further selection and sales as desirable animals. From this point on, artificial mating occurred."

My research confirms what Franz Fanon pointed out in *Black Skin, White Masks* half a century ago, namely, that blacks and whites continue to ingest substantial quantities of a racial folklore that physicalizes black human beings while devaluing their minds. This demonstrates in turn the persisting influence of the nineteenth-century "law of compensation," which postulates an inverse relationship between brain and brawn. (The ubiquitous "dumb jock" stereotype is yet another version of this folk belief.) A long tradition of racist humor about black appetites for sex and food, the widespread popular belief in the eugenic breeding of slaves, the longevity of ideas about black immunities to pain and disease, the panracial belief in black athletic superiority—all of this confirms that black people have been identified with their bodies to an extraordinary degree.

The influence of such ideas on African Americans has never been studied in a systematic way. What we do know is that stereotypes of black athletic superiority are now firmly established as the most recent version of a racial folklore that has spread across the face of the earth over the past two centuries, and a corresponding belief in white athletic inferiority pervades popular thinking about racial difference. Such ideas probably do more than anything else in our public life to encourage the idea that blacks and whites are biologically different in meaningful ways. Conservative racial thinkers like Charles Murray and Dinesh D'Souza have declared that black athletic superiority is evidence of more profound racial differences, and there is no telling how many people, black and white, may agree with them.

The potential consequences of regarding oneself as essentially or uniquely physical by nature would thus include particular doubts about one's intelligence, the value of getting an education, and the idea of learning for its own sake. This relates in

turn to the growing interest in why the academic performance of socially advantaged black children continues to lag behind that of white children of comparable social status. "How do we explain the underproductivity of middle-class kids, of able and gifted minority youngsters who come out of situations where you would expect high achievement?" asks Edmund W. Gordon, a professor emeritus of psychology at Yale University and the co-chairman of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement. "This is not something that a lot of people feel comfortable talking about."

Explaining this phenomenon will require cultural anthropological analysis of a very high order. I would also suggest that productive thinking about this problem need not be monopolized by the experts. Any parent who takes the time to reflect on the intellectual formation of his or her children will be able to identify some of the factors that are likely to promote the development of intellectual interests and self-confidence. Such factors do not include a sense that one's primary aptitude is physical self-expression. That is why one of our goals should be the abolition of a social universe in which African-American

can schoolchildren cannot believe that the black college students who come to mentor them are not athletes, since television has persuaded them that every black person is an athlete.

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John Hoberman teaches in the Department of Germanic Language at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race, New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1997.

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