"Sports, Political Philosophy, and the African American"

Early

Strategy

- To extend the analysis of blacks in modern sports
- To demonstrate how sports became political
- Ultimately, to argue that sports themselves are not political
19th Century U.S. Attitudes

- 19th c. white attitudes in the U.S. viewed blacks as the "lady of the races"
  - Blacks were associated with the feminine and the feminine side of nature
  - Blacks . . .
    - tended toward the arts and oratory
    - were more religious
    - were more musical
    - were more attracted to colors
    - were drawn to physical sensations and not abstract ideas
- "In short, blacks, like women, couldn't think but they could feel deeply." (415)

Uncle Tom's Cabin

- Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel popularized this feminine view of blacks in 19th c. American society
- Uncle Tom exhibits many feminine, passive characteristics, especially in contrast to the Baldwin character
  - At the same time, Tom is a strong, muscular person with leadership potential (an athlete)
  - "Everything about him [Tom] glows with the aura of the feminine: his gentleness, his patience, his willingness to sacrifice….What we have in Tom is the feminization of Christ himself as a savior figure, much is keeping with the nineteenth-century view, the victorian view of Christ." (416)
"Uncle Tom"

- The unmanning of the black man in American culture was an "unstoppable force"
- Early suggests that this was one factor that led to blacks using "Uncle Tom" as a derogatory and abusive term
- An "Uncle Tom" is a black man who is excessively unassertive, non-threatening, and who acquiesces to white oppression
- Ironically, the muscular black man was "an icon in American popular culture before the Civil War"
- This muscular presence was neutralized when represented as de-sexed and feminine

Imposing Social Control

- "In this regard, he [the muscular black man] was a man whose presence generated a specific need to confine him, indeed, the presence seemed to have been evoked in order to confine it. The philosophical and political issues surrounding the muscular black man, and, in turn, the assertive black man, for the muscularity became an outward symbol of an assertiveness that had to be placed under white social control, were to achieve their highest resonance in the realm of sports." (417)
- Early thinks that Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes* makes a similar claim:
  - Sports exist as a means of "white hegemonic ideology" – muscularity is confined to athletics and sport
Romantic Racialism

- Romantic racialism (romantic racism): "dressing up blacks in sentimental clothing to make them more palatable, more acceptable to whites" (417)
- This involves the romanticizing of racial difference in order to make those differences acceptable
- Major racial trait "is the physicality of blacks" as "primitives" and anti-intellectual

Endorsing Romantic Racialism

- Blacks themselves have endorsed romantic racialism
  - Afrocentrism (the Black Aesthetic): the belief in a particular black way of acting and being where blacks are more spiritual, musical, emotional, etc.
  - Pride in sports and music: blacks' pride in achievement in areas popular culture considers "charismatic" and "anti-intellectual"
  - Success in sports and music "has further intensified the idea of blacks as primitives, as somehow more in tune with their bodies and more in tune with their feelings and their intuitions, their instincts, than whites." (418)
Understanding Blacks in Sports

- "There can be no real understanding of African Americans and sports or how African Americans see sports without a fundamental understanding of how the body of the African American has become the subject of racist philosophical and political beliefs, of romantic racialism." (418)

Popular Culture

- Popular culture (or mass culture) is the "entertainment machinery" developed in the U.S. since late 19th c.
- Early credits popular culture as responsible for a shift in romantic racialism
  - The shift is from blacks as humble Christians to the super-masculine
  - This shift occurred at the same time that blacks were exercising authority at home and in society
  - Early suggests that lynchings were a response to rising black authority and were means of political intimidation and social control
Rise of Popular Culture

- Technology made music widely accessible, in particular through recordings
- Professional and collegiate sports became more popular in the early 20th c.
  - Blacks banned from baseball in 1880
  - Blacks didn't play collegiate football since blacks were not admitted to white colleges
  - Discrimination led blacks to boxing, where they were disproportionately represented
  - But, blacks were banned from competing for the heavyweight title

Political Significance to Sports

- "Blacks were largely banned from fighting for the heavyweight title for the same reason they were banned from other sports. Athletics were considered a sign of white male superiority. Sports existed symbolically, politically, to show the world that whites were the better race, the more aggressive race, the conquering, imperial, more masculine race. In other words, it was whites, not blacks, who first attached political significance to sports by banning blacks from competition." (420)
1908 and Jack Johnson

- In 1908 Jack Johnson defeated Tommy Burns to become the first black heavyweight champion
- This event begins the shift toward seeing black men as superior athletes
  - In addition, Johnson and other black athletes had white wives and girlfriends
  - "This tied together in our popular culture the idea of the black man as superior athlete and superior sexual competitor to the white man." (421)
- Early thinks popular culture has endorsed the view that blacks' niche in American society is in sports

Intelligence in Sports

- There is a common sentiment that the sports in which blacks dominate do not require intelligence
- Early sees this form of romantic racialism in headlines that appeared after Tiger Woods won the Western Open in 1997
  - "Woods Wins in Triumph of Mind Over Matter"
  - "Brain, not Brawn, Captures Western Open for Woods"
Early's Analysis

- Golf is seen as more intellectual than other other sports, especially since it does not require extreme physical abilities
- The headlines imply that Woods has something special that allows him to succeed
  - Woods is not just another dumb jock
- Early thinks the headlines lead to a false view
  - A certain mental ability is required for all high-pressure, high-stakes sports—golf is not special
  - A certain physical ability is required for all sports—all sports require muscle memory, training, automatic responses, and other physical skills

Blacks View of Sports

- Early characterizes blacks view of sports as
  - Opposition to sports and play as a waste of time and a form of degradation
    - or
  - A means of access for social and economic mobility within American society
    - or
  - A means of political expression (especially during the civil rights movement)
Blacks as Political Figure

- The presence of blacks as political figures arose during Muhammad Ali's ascendency in boxing
- The role of black athlete as political advocate has continued
  - Michael Jordan was criticized for not backing a black N.C. politician
  - Some see a tension between black athletes as oppressed by white hegemonic ideals and black athletes as expressions of black political ideology

Sports are Politically Neutral

- "There would seem to be nothing inherent in the performance of any sport that would be considered the expression of an explicit political ideology. As a performance, sports seem to transcend any given political system or political ideas." (424)
- Early does not deny that there are political issues surrounding sports but he does not think sports themselves are inherently political
Over-Aspiring to Athletics

- Why do blacks over-aspire to be athletes?
  - Partially because no one questions their ability since blacks are viewed as superior athletes
  - Partially because pursuing other vocations requires mental accomplishment and intellectual pursuits and intellectualism is seen as white
    - Both these views are vestiges of romantic racialism
  - Sailor argues that black aptitude for sports reflects black "intellectualism" and is what blacks are good at
    - The same characteristics are those endorsed by Stowe and romantic racialism

Racial Stereotyping

- Early argues against Sailor’s view of blacks as naturally inclined toward sales and entertainment
  - "Because an ethnic or racial group dominates a particularly small industry really says nothing about what the majority of people in the group should do, especially as the majority clearly will have insufficient talent to go into that industry for a living." (425)
- What this attitude exhibits is the difficulty and challenges facing blacks in America
  - The problem is that careers outside of sports are not seen as options
    - Black youths over-aspiring to sports is the symptom
“Neither Sailor, Herrnstein, or Murray understand the implications of what they are suggesting. Blacks do not wish to be seen merely as America’s entertainers or merely as people who are good at athletics. They want to explore the whole range of career possibilities. This is especially important because they have been denied access to so many careers for so long.” (426)

Sports and Racism

- Sports may have intensified racism through romantic racialist assumptions
- At the same time, sports may have broadened the notion of democracy in America
- Early thinks the solution to racial equality in America is unknown but is an important question to be addressed