Chapter 7: Race/ethnicity

# 7.1. Knowledge about race today (from PBS, “Race: The Power of an Illusion”)

## Looking Beneath the Surface: Current Knowledge about Race

Many social scientists have studied the idea of race and research have produced important knowledge about race and racial classification systems. This knowledge challenges many assumptions that people continue to accept uncritically as they discuss race in society. There are many questions about human physical variation that remain to be studied, but at this time most scientists who have studied race agree on the following ten points:\*

1. **Race is a modern idea.** Ancient cultures classified people by religion, status, class, even language, but not by physical characteristics. The word ‘race’ was not used in English until the 16th century.
2. **Race has no genetic basis.** No single trait or gene provides a basis for distinguishing people in one so-called race from all people in other so-called races.
3. **Human subspecies don’t exist.** Human beings have not been on Earth long enough and they have not been isolated enough to evolve into separate races or subspecies. Compared to all other animals, humans share more biological similarities than other species.
4. **Skin color really is only skin deep.** Genes that influence skin color are not related to genes that influence other physical traits, physical skills, or intellectual abilities. To identify someone by skin color tells you nothing else about the biology of that person.
5. **More genetic variation occurs within, not between, what many people believe to be “races.”** Two people from China may be as genetically different from each other as either of them is different from an Italian or Norwegian. Over 85 percent of all genetic variations can be found within any single local populations, and variations in one local population, such as Kurds, are no greater than variations between that population and other local populations, such as Korean or Navajo.
6. **Slavery predates the idea of race.** Slavery is not a recent invention. It existed in many ancient societies, but slaves were members of conquered populations or people indebted to others. People were not enslaved because of their physical characteristics or beliefs about their natural inferiority. The U.S. was the first society to base slavery exclusively on the shared physical characteristics of the slaves.
7. **Race and freedom evolved together in contemporary history.** Despite a commitment to the notion that “All men are created equal,” the economy of the early United States was built largely on slave labor. This inconsistency was rationalized by a racial ideology that established white supremacy and Black inferiority.
8. **Race has been used to justify social inequalities as natural.** Over time racial ideology and the idea of white superiority became accepted as “common sense” among white U.S. citizens. Ideology was used to justify slavery, the extermination of “Indians,” laws that excluded Asian immigrants, and the use of military force to take land from Mexico. Despite a commitment to democracy, racial ideology was built into the organization of American society and served as a basis for whites to claim privileges denied to others.
9. **Race isn’t biological, but racism is a social reality.** The idea of race has had a powerful impact on who has access to resources, power, and opportunities in the U.S. and around the world. This has affected the lives of all Americans, even if they are not aware of it.
10. **Colorblindness will not end racism.** To pretend that race does not exist does not create racial equality. Ideas and beliefs about race have shaped the organization of American society. The influence of race and racial ideology must be understood and acknowledged before we can eliminate the deep cultural and structural processes that continue to create racial inequalities.

As these 10 points come to be widely understood and used when thinking about human physical variation and when interacting with others, it will be difficult to maintain previously dangerous and destructive ideas and beliefs about race. Research suggests that we will never be able to neatly classify all human beings into biologically-based racial categories. For now, “human being” is the only biological category that makes racial sense.

*\* The titles of the 10 points are worded exactly the same as they are listed in “RACE - The Power of an Illusion” produced by California Newsreel in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS).* **© 2003 California Newsreel. All rights reserved.** The explanation of each point and the introduction and conclusion are by Jay Coakley.

# 7.2. Media coverage of Joe Louis

Whites in the United States and other colonized areas used racial ideology to justify the physical mistreatment of African slaves. Later, they used it to explain the success of African American boxers and other athletes in the early part of this century.

According to dominant racial ideology, Black males were believed to have unique physical stamina and skills; however, white people also believed that those physical attributes were grounded in an absence of deep human feelings and intellectual awareness. Many whites even thought that the skulls of Black people were so thick that they could not be bruised or broken by a white man’s fist. Thus, when Black boxers were successful, this race ideology was used to explain their success.

For example, after Joe Louis, the legendary Black heavyweight boxing champion in the 1930s and 1940s, defeated Italian Primo Carnera in a heavily publicized fight before sixty thousand people in Yankee Stadium in 1935, sportswriters in the United States described him as “savage and animalistic.” A major news service story sent all over the country began this way:

Something sly and sinister and perhaps not quite human came out of the African jungle last night to strike down and utterly demolish ... Primo Carnera. ... (cited in Mead, 1985).

Noted sportswriter Grantland Rice referred to Louis’s quickness as “the speed of the jungle, the instinctive speed of the wild.” Before another Louis fight, *New York Times* sports editor Paul Gallico wrote a nationwide syndicated column in which he described Louis in this way:

...the magnificent animal.... He eats. He sleeps. He fights. ...Is he all instinct, all animal? Or have a hundred million years left a fold upon his brain? I see in this colored man something so cold, so hard, so cruel that I wonder as to his bravery. Courage in the animal is desperation. Courage in the human is something incalculable and divine.

Despite hundreds of these stories, Joe Louis remained dedicated to representing Black Americans as an ambassador of goodwill to whites. But although he trained hard and presented himself as a gentleman, he was still described in a story in major New York newspaper as *“a natural athlete ... born to listen to jazz ... eat a lot of fried chicken, play ball with the gang on the corner and never do a lick of heavy work he could escape.”* Racial ideology can be powerful; it can shape what people see and how they interpret the world in Black and white.

Published descriptions of Joe Louis and other African American athletes capture dominant racial ideology as it was applied to sports in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century. But before these racist sports stories, whites used other methods of making themselves feel comfortable with their beliefs about their superiority. For example, over the past two centuries, many whites in Europe and the U.S. have had difficulty accepting the idea that they might be physically inferior to people of color.

Many whites have not believed Darwin’s notion that brains are always superior to muscles, but rather they believed the ancient Greek idea that strong minds and strong bodies come together in the same package. This has led them to wonder: Could it be that dark-skinned peoples are superior in some way to light-skinned people? Many whites have worried about this. They have worried so much at certain times that they have accepted several myths designed to restore faith in their racial superiority.

A classic example is the myth of “Tarzan, King of the Jungle” (that is, king of the *African* jungle). In 1914, Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote *Tarzan of the Apes*, the first of his twenty-four Tarzan novels, which constituted the biggest-selling series of novels of the century. His stories then found their way into comic books and movies that were read and seen by additional millions of people, including millions of children, and especially white children who were forming their ideas about race.

According to University of Texas scholar, John Hoberman, Tarzan stories were very popular throughout much of this century for many reasons. One reason was that white people in Western industrial societies found it very comforting and exciting to read about a white man with aristocratic British ancestry who used a combination of physical strength and intelligence to become “king of the African jungle,” ruler of the “noble Black savages” and physically imposing beasts living in “uncivilized” colonized territories on the “dark continent”.

This white Tarzan was a real model and cultural hero for whites who wanted proof that they deserved their racial privilege. In physical appearance, he resembled a combination of a Roman gladiator and a Greek god, and even though the fictional Tarzan was raised and socialized by apes, he eventually exhibited inner, “in-born racial qualities” that enabled him to not only survive but even rise above the “primitive” and “uncivilized” conditions in Africa. Therefore, those who read about Tarzan could conclude that whites were “naturally” superior to people of color.

Burroughs did not intend to contribute to the formation of racial ideology when he wrote his Tarzan novels. He mainly wanted to convince sedentary Englishmen living off the fruits of colonialism and imperialism to change their ways and get in good physical condition lest they become weak and vulnerable as a military force. But his stories caught on and became popular partly because his white readers lived in countries whose economies had been built on colonialism combined with slavery, and they had deep fears and insecurities about people of color and white privilege.

Fears about racial differences are not dead; nor is white privilege. Race logic and racial ideology are still with us. Some have suggested that the increasing importance of sport in North America has gone hand in hand with curiosity and myths about racial differences. White people in the 1920s and 1930s admired Tarzan as a “great white hope,” and some whites in the 1960s and 1970s followed in their footsteps by looking for great white male athletes.

The search for white athletes may be less prevalent today, but efforts to reaffirm racial ideology now take other forms, such as giving excessive attention to Black athletes who fail to live up to social expectations. If enough attention can be focused on the moral failures and character weaknesses of O.J. Simpson, Mike Tyson, Allen Iverson, and other Black athletes who have excelled physically in sports, there will be no need for Tarzan myths or great white hopes. These new strategies can preserve racial ideology and white privilege.

**Note:** This section was partly inspired by Hoberman, J. 1992. *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport*. New York: The Free Press.

# 7.3. Racial ideology in sports

Some people, including Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder, a former sports analyst for CBS, have combined genetic and experiential factors to seek explanations for the success of African American athletes in certain sports. In 1988 Snyder suggested that African Americans make good ball carriers in football because Blacks were “bred” during slavery times to have big, strong thighs. Snyder conveniently ignored millions of African Americans with skinny thighs, and he was ignorant of the historical fact that the control of white slave masters over sexual behavior between Black men and women was never extensive enough to shape the genetic traits of even a small portion of the U.S. African American population.

So many white men forced Black women into sexual intercourse during the slave era that many African Americans today have a white ancestor somewhere in their past. How do these “white genes” figure into biological explanations? Is this the reason African Americans are better football players than Blacks from many other countries? And what other silly things might race logic lead some people to say?

Snyder’s explanation of the achievements of African American football players is as ridiculous as saying that Californians are great volleyball players because their ancestors migrated west in covered wagons and all those who were not strong enough or couldn’t jump up on the wagons died during the tedious journey. Therefore, California was settled by great white jumpers! Is this the reason U.S. volleyball teams have been dominated by white Californians who have great vertical jumps and amazing “hang times”? This question is beyond silliness. But it is very similar to questions and explanations about the relation of slavery to success in running, boxing, football, and basketball.

Let us ask some questions of our own. Did Africans survive being chained on shelves during the long journey on slave ships because they could run fast and jump high? Did slave owners breed slaves to be fast runners and high jumpers? And wouldn’t the fastest runners and best jumpers have escaped the slave traders in West Africa? Racial ideology often leads people to overlook such questions.

For another example of racial ideology in sports, consider the winners of high-profile marathons over the past twenty years. When Black Africans have won, there are attempts to find the physical attributes common in their countries of origins that led to their victories, whereas when white North Americans or Europeans win marathons, including all the men’s and women’s wheelchair divisions, there are no references to their physical attributes that might be related to their whiteness or their country of origin, although people may mention a country of origin in passing.

The racial ideology that is used leads many white people not to “see” white skin as a factor in the success of these racers; instead, they focus on strong character, hard work, efficient training, and their traits as individuals rather than as a representative of all white people or people from a particular country of origin. Whiteness is not noticed because it is the assumed norm according to the race logic used by many people; it was not a “fact” that led to further questions and inquiry. Certainly, nobody is offering to fund studies of whiteness, national origins, and success in long-distance wheelchair races.

The fact that Kenyans from the Rift Valley in East Africa have dominated distance racing has attracted much attention and study since the 1960s when they first started winning medals in international races. Initially, people have wondered if there is something about the biology of Black bodies that contribute to their success. Research on Kenyan racers was done to see what might distinguish them from other athletes in terms of physical characteristics and athletic potential. Studies were published claiming that Kenyans had physical characteristics that could account for their success, that these characteristics were genetic in origin, and that Kenyans were different from other people of color from other regions of Africa and from white Europeans. The interesting thing about these studies is that they were initiated in connection with hunches and questions about the genetic characteristics of dark-skinned people from Kenya.

Expressions of dominant racial ideology come in a variety of forms. For example, the emergence and success of Kenyans and Ethiopians in distance racing has been discussed and explained in terms grounded in long-held stereotypes and forms of racism that are common in both North America and Western Europe.

The idea of the “natural” Black athlete is deeply ingrained in what has become a form of global racism in predominantly white societies. People simply ignore the obvious fact that Black athletes, like white athletes, are culturally produced. Instead of jumping to “race-based” genetic conclusions, we must examine the racial myths that surround explanations of sports performance among Black athletes.

In the case of Kenyan athletes, we must recognize that running is an integral part of a Kenyan body culture that we can understand only in the context of colonialism, the globalization of high-performance sports exported from predominantly white societies, and the history of and current conditions in Kenya itself.

# 7.4. Native Americans and team mascots

**Darken Up, Asshole: Reflections on Indian Mascots and White Rage**

By Tim Wise (Published on [*Counterpunch*](http://www.counterpunch.org), 8/10/05; see also [Lip Magazine](http://www.lipmagazine.org/~timwise/darkenup.html) (Used here with permission from Tim Wise)

All I wanted was a lousy beer. OK, a few lousy beers. Is that too much to ask? Of course, I suppose it was partly my fault. After all, I had taken my laptop with me into the bar, having just come from the library, where I’d spent the day doing research for a new book. Computer in hand, and being a writer and all, I naturally flipped it open to type in a few random thoughts for a column: not this column, actually. This one emerged from what happened next.

Computers in brewpubs are like steaming piles of shit in a field full of flies: guaranteed to attract attention from the regulars. And so it happened, when a guy who’d gotten a four- or five-pint head start on me, asked what I was working on.

I could have lied. Maybe shoulda’. Didn’t, though.

“I’m a writer, just making a few notes,” I answered back.

I hoped that might be the end of it, but I sorta’ knew it wouldn’t be.

“You a songwriter?” he asked. Made sense, seeing as how this was a bar in the heart of Nashville, just four or five blocks from Music Row: a street lined with recording studios and record label offices.

Once more, I could have lied. Maybe shoulda’. But then again, tell someone you’re a songwriter in this town and you’ll have to listen to their latest song, which they’ll whip out, on an already recorded demo, hoping you know someone to whom it can be passed along.

I didn’t have time for that bullshit, so I just told the truth.

“Nope, I’m a political columnist. I write mostly about racism, economics, a few other social issues.”

Now here’s the thing: Up to this point, I’ve remained purposely vague, not tipping off my newfound bar mate as to my political stripes, or where I might be coming from when it comes to race. But here’s the thing too: I’m white, and so is he. And there is an unspoken understanding among white folks, especially white men, it seems -- and especially, perhaps, in the South -- and that understanding goes roughly like this: when people of color aren’t around, it’s perfectly acceptable to talk badly about them.

As such, I knew what was coming, or at least that something was, though the form it would take was to remain a mystery, at least, that is, for the next three or four nanoseconds; that being the time it would take for the guy on the neighboring stool to formulate his next thought. And here I am using the term “thought” generously.

Apparently, ESPN had just announced that the NCAA had decided to sanction schools that continue to use demeaning, stereotype-laden mascots of American Indians for their athletic teams. This, as it turns out, was not sitting well with the aging frat boy here, and he figured, I guess, that I would agree with him. It never crossed his mind that I might support the decision; indeed, think the NCAA had let the dozen or so schools in question off lightly. After all, they had only barred them from hosting NCAA tournament games, or displaying their logos at such events, in the latter instance not even until 2008, and all of this, only in basketball.

“What’s the big deal?” he huffed. “There’s nothing racist about a mascot. Talk about some oversensitive bullshit!”

Easy for him to say, I thought. Folks like us rarely have to worry about being objectified, and turned into dehumanizing caricatures. When people like you run the country and every institution therein, “sticks and stones” takes on a much more truthful ring than it does for anyone else.

Knowing I had an obligation to respond, yet wanting to do so in a way that wouldn’t get me thrown out of the bar, I asked if he thought it was really appropriate for those of us who weren’t Indian to say what was and wasn’t offensive to those who were.

“What?” he replied, clearly not expecting to have been challenged in such a way.

I repeated the question, at which point he suggested that not all Indians found mascots offensive. He even had some Indian blood, he insisted, way back in his family line: a claim that single-handedly proved what little he knows of indigenous culture. After all, the notion of “Indian blood” and blood quantum, were largely concepts created by the white ruling class to limit the scope of land settlements with Indian nations. Indians were not, with a few notable exceptions, biological determinists.

“Take the Seminoles,” he thundered. “They actually support Florida State calling themselves that!”

True enough, the official Seminole nation of Florida is on record as supporting the use of their name at FSU. But of course, there are other Seminoles in the region who feel differently, not to mention the Black Seminoles who have been all but disowned by those who consider themselves “true” representatives of the tribe. Indian politics are complicated, as it turns out; much more so, in fact, than the average white guy at a bar, who is nothing if not predictable.

“Understood,” I replied. It was at that point I offered what seems, to me, the only logical compromise on the matter: one which, if this guy really felt as though Indians supported mascots, he’d be quick to accept.

“So,” I said, “How about we just let Indian folks vote on it. But just Indians, and just those who are either tribally enrolled or otherwise clearly identified and active in Native communities, culture or politics? In other words, let’s stay out of it, you and me, and let those who are directly affected make the call.”

He didn’t like that much, as was made evident by how quickly he changed the subject. “What about Notre Dame?” he shot back. “The Fighting Irish. What about that? My ancestors were Irish,” he continued (ah yes, one of those Irish Indians), “and it doesn’t bother me one bit!”

Of course, the comparison was utterly unconvincing. To begin with, to be called a fighter is not the same as to be called, or typified visually as a “savage.” There is a qualitative difference, made all the more evident by the history of this nation: a history in which fighting Indians were slaughtered, and for whom their willingness to fight back at those who sought to exterminate them, provided their murderers with what the latter thought the ultimate justification for the perpetration of a Holocaust. Fighting Irishmen, meanwhile, got to be viewed as perfect candidates for the Union Army, or for your local police force.

In other words, one group of fighters had to be eliminated, the other, assimilated. If we can’t discern the yawning chasm between these two things, well, we really should stop drinking, be it at the local brewpub, or anywhere else.

Secondly, indigenous persons, unlike Irish Americans, continue to be marginalized in the United States. A substantial percentage have been geographically ghettoized and isolated on some of the nation’s most desolate land, while those off the “rez” have largely been stripped of the cultures, languages, and customs of their forbears by a boarding school policy implemented against their families, which policy’s stated purpose from the 1800s through much of the twentieth century was to “Kill the Indian and save the man.”

To be Irish American is to be a member of one of the largest white ethnic groups in the nation, and one of the most accepted and celebrated at that. It wasn’t always that way, to be sure, but it is now. For Irish folks to be stereotyped as fighters simply doesn’t have the same impact, given the power and position of the Irish in this society, as when stereotypes are deployed against subordinated groups. Objectification only works its magic upon those who continue to be vilified. For those on top, it can become a source of amusement, laughter – a good time.

“Yeah,” I responded. “But when Notre Dame chose to call themselves the Fightin’ Irish, the school was made up overwhelmingly of Irish Catholics. In other words, it was Irish folks choosing that name for themselves. How many Indians do you think were really in on the decision to call themselves ‘redskins,’ or to be portrayed as screaming warriors on someone else’s school clothing?”

Again, silence, and again a changing of the subject.

“Yeah, but what really galls me,” he continued, “is that a bunch of these schools are just trying to honor Native Americans. They’re just trying to pay respect to the spirit of the Indians. It’s like nothing we can do is ever enough for those people.”

Aside from how calling indigenous folks “those people” jibes with a true desire to honor them (let alone his claim to be one at some remove), this particular nugget – offered by far more than just one drunk guy at a Nashville bar – has always struck me as especially vile. If schools wanted to honor First Nations people, after all, they could do it in any number of more meaningful ways. They could establish Native American studies programs and fund them adequately. They could step up their recruitment of Indian students, staff and faculty, rather than retreating from such efforts in the face of misplaced backlash to affirmative action. They could strip the names off of buildings on their campuses that pay tribute to those who participated in the butchering of Native peoples. Here in Nashville that process could begin by renaming, without delay, any building named after Andrew Jackson, of which there are several.

Perhaps most importantly, we could begin by telling the truth about what was done to the indigenous of this land, rather than trying to paper over that truth, minimize the horror, and, once again, change the subject. You know the kind of people I’m speaking of: the ones who refuse to label the elimination of over ninety-five percent of the native peoples of the Americas “genocide.”

Folks like conservative author Dinesh D’Souza, who, in a debate with me at Western Washington University in May, insisted that terming the process genocide was absurd. It was, to him, merely an emotional appeal on my part, devoid of content; calculated to gain applause at the expense of honesty. To Dinesh, genocide was an inappropriate term because most of the Indians who perished died from diseases, not warfare waged by whites.

That Dinesh has never read the definition of genocide, readily available in the United Nation’s 1948 Genocide Convention, certainly was no surprise. But had he done so, he would have seen that in order to qualify as genocide, one does not have to directly kill anyone per se. Rather, genocide describes any of the following acts, committed with the intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting conditions calculated to bring about the group’s destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, or forcibly transferring the children of the group to another.

In fact, each of these categories has been met in the case of American Indians. And had it not been for conquest, those diseases to which Indians had no resistance – and which colonists praised as the “work of God,” clearing the land for them – wouldn’t have ravaged the native populations as they did. To imply that such deaths were merely accidental or incidental would be like saying the Nazis bore no responsibility for the 1.6 million or so Jews who died of disease and starvation in the camps, rather than having been gassed or shot. But try saying that at your local neighborhood synagogue and see how far you get, with good reason.

Once again, I suggested that if Indians thought mascots were a form of flattery and tribute, then surely, they would vote that way in an Indian-only plebiscite. So, I repeated, why not just let them vote on it, and keep out of their way? After all, that would be honoring them too: trusting the wisdom of Indian peoples to prevail, one way or the other.

“But this is America,” he shot back. “And I’ve got a right to my opinion too! I shouldn’t be disallowed from having my say on it, just because I’m white. That’s reverse discrimination.”

Ah yes, reverse discrimination. Not being able to turn other people into a cartoon for your own enjoyment is now to be seen as a form of oppression. One wonders; indeed, how white folks can stand such a burden placed upon our shoulders.

Just as I was about to respond, he pulled out some money to pay his bar tab. And as he slapped down his bills upon the bar – twenties as it turns out – and I had the occasion to glance down, my eyes fixing on the eternal gaze of this nation’s pre-eminent Indian killer, I wondered out loud, why it is that white folks get more upset about taking offensive Indian imagery down, than we do about the normalization of white male imagery like that on this particular greenback? Why do we not find that image, on one of our most common monetary denominations enraging: an image that we’re supposed to revere; a man we’re supposed to praise; a “hero” we’re supposed to view as a national role model of sorts. In other words, why do we allow ourselves, as white men, to be turned into a caricature too--into a stereotype?

I’d like to think that most white guys are better than Andrew Jackson. I’d like to. But on days like this, I just don’t know.

# 7.5. Samoan men in college and professional football

In 1997, Western Samoa amended its constitution and changed its name to Samoa, as it had been named when it joined the United Nations in 1976. However, the residents in the U.S. territory of American Samoa resisted this change and continued to use the name Western Samoa and Western Samoans to identify themselves as well as the independent State of Samoa and its inhabitants.

Today, the two Samoas use the same language and have the same ethnicity, but their cultures have diverged. The American Samoans generally emigrate to Hawaii and the continental U.S. and identify with U.S. culture, including the sports of American football and baseball. The people of Western Samoa, on the other hand, usually emigrate to New Zealand and give priority to the sports of rugby and cricket.

Beginning in the 1990s, U.S. universities have recruited football players from Western Samoa, and a disproportionate number of these athletes have gone on to play in the NFL. This phenomenon was first noted by ESPN writer Bruce Feldman in 2002 (see below), and in 2007, ESPN published an informative series of stories about Samoan men in the NFL. The following are links to those stories:

* ESPN. 2007. Samoan football players in the NFL. *ESPN – The Magazine* (May 28): online, <http://espn.go.com/gen/s/2002/0528/1387810.html>.
* Feldman, Bruce. 2002. Rock star. *ESPN – The Magazine* (November 26): online, <http://espn.go.com/magazine/vol4no24fonoti.html>.
* Feldman, Bruce. 2007. A recruiting pitch of another kind. *ESPN – The Magazine* (May 28): online, <http://espn.go.com/gen/s/2002/0527/1387550.html>.
* Lapchick, Richard E. 2007. Asian American athletes: past, present, and future. *ESPN – The Magazine* (May 1): online, <http://espn.go.com/gen/s/2002/0430/1376346.html>.
* Miller, Ted. 2007. American football, Samoan style.*ESPN – The Magazine* (May 28): online, <http://espn.go.com/gen/s/2002/0527/1387562.html>.
* Garber, Greg. 2007a. The Dominican Republic of the NFL *ESPN – The Magazine* (May 28): online, <http://espn.go.com/gen/s/2002/0527/1387626.html>.
* Garber, Greg. 2007b. They might be giants. *ESPN—The Magazine* (May 28): online, <http://espn.go.com/gen/s/2002/0527/1387627.html>.

Historian Rob Ruck (2019) has studied the issue of Samoans in the NFL and reported that over recent seasons, there have been 50 Samoans on NFL – more than 40 times what would be expected on the size of the Samoan population in the United States. A similar pattern exists in Division I NCAA football where over 200 Samoans are on recent rosters. “Football,” said one Samoan man interviewed by Ruck, is “in our culture.” Their war dances before games emphasize a warrior spirit and the strength to overcome fears. Tied to definitions of masculinity, participation in American football is akin to a rite of passage for young Samoan men.

Ruck, Rob. 2019. Why Samoans are 40 times more likely to play in the NFL. *Gvwire.com* (August 15): <https://gvwire.com/2019/08/15/why-samoans-are-40-times-more-likely-to-play-in-the-nfl/>.

# 7.6. Profit motives and desegregating sports

Money and winning can be powerful forces in sports. People generally believe that if revenues can be increased or win-loss records improved, change is worth it – even if the change is inconsistent with patterns of race relations.

The history of desegregation in American sports clearly shows that when a winning season is necessary to generate money and profits, there is a tendency to recruit and play the best athletes, regardless of skin color. When sport team owners discovered they could make large profits in baseball, football, and basketball, they and their coaches abandoned their traditions of racial exclusion in favor of making money. Although some teams tried to remain competitive without recruiting Black players, they dropped their policies when they discovered that winning could be difficult when they ignored the talents of skilled athletes.

Desegregation is a complex process grounded in a combination of social, legal-political, and economic forces. It usually occurs gradually and is promoted and restrained by many factors. This is certainly true in the case of U.S. sports. But because money is such a powerful motivator in capitalist societies, it is not surprising that desegregation first occurred after the Civil War in the revenue-producing sports of horse racing and boxing, and then in the other major money-making sports in the middle of the twentieth century.

In the U.S., Black jockeys were plentiful before the turn of the century, but a racist press, a white jockeys’ union, and laws making segregation mandatory (Jim Crow laws) forced Blacks out of the public eye in horse racing and back into the less prestigious and less visible roles of trainer and stable attendant. Horse owners did not resist this change, because there were plenty of white jockeys, and because a race is won more by the horse than by the jockey.



***During the 1940s it was difficult to convince white male executives to open sport’s doors to Black players. They were accustomed to having Black service workers open doors for them***

In boxing, however, the individual fighter was solely responsible for the victory. Segregation existed, but there were notable (and newsworthy) exceptions. White promoters and boxing managers saw Blacks as potentially big money-makers because they were box-office attractions. Given the race logic used by many whites through most of the twentieth century, even the rumor of a fight between a Black man and a white one would sell newspapers, and an actual fight would generate ticket sales bringing handsome profits to white promoters and managers.

Desegregation was also financially motivated in professional and college team sports, where people other than the athletes themselves could make money. Desegregation started slowly, but as soon as powerful people in sports realized that Black athletes could help them win games and boost profits, they questioned and changed traditions of racial exclusion.

This is part of the reason the non-revenue-producing sports in U.S. colleges and universities seldom have Black team members, and part of the reason 81 percent of all Black men receiving athletic scholarships in the 305 Division I universities during the mid-1990s played basketball or football, the two college sports with the biggest revenue-generating potential. Ironically, the scholarships received by many white athletes from well-to-do families (in such non-revenue-producing sports as gymnastics, golf, swimming, tennis, soccer, and volleyball) are sometimes subsidized by revenue-producing teams whose success is due partly to the hard work and efforts of Black athletes from lower-income families.

This results in a form of "reverse sport welfare" in which relatively poor students subsidize their wealthier white classmates in college sports! Even though white scholarship athletes in non-revenue sports seldom think of their athletic grants in this way, this is one of the reasons intercollegiate sports were desegregated.

If Black athletes had not improved winning records and increased profits for those who controlled sports and sport-sponsoring organizations, the policies of exclusion that had restricted Black participation for so long would not have changed as rapidly or as completely as they did in certain sports. When sports have made little or no money for their sponsors, there has been little interest in recruiting Blacks or making opportunities to participate available in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

This fact, combined with a lack of opportunities in the job market, has led many young Blacks to pursue opportunities in those few sports where they exist. "Hoop dreams" are powerful when there is little else to dream about.

## Perceived opportunities and the development of sport skills

Those who control sports are not the only ones influenced by financial factors and the desire for success. These things also influence all young people with athletic potential, and Blacks are no exception. Blacks are even more likely than whites to emphasize sports as a means of achieving prestige and economic success because they perceive more barriers to achievement in other activities (Harris, 1994).

It is also important to note that Blacks in the United States have excelled in sports requiring little expensive equipment and training. For example, basketballs are inexpensive, and the best coaching is widely available in public school programs. Furthermore, outdoor basketball courts are inexpensive to build and maintain. No grass is needed, and they can be squeezed into confined spaces. This is the reason basketball has come to be known as the "city game," and the reason it is the sport of choice among many Black youths growing up in low-income urban areas where resources are scarce and opportunities to be noticed in other activities are rare.

Anthropologist Robert Sands, who has studied sprinters on college track teams, suggests that most sprinters today are Black because Black children growing up in urban areas run constantly. For Black children, more than for white children, speed becomes play: "speed is everyday life, speed is the cultural password leading to success in sport participation and the possibility of future financial success". In other words, being fast is one of the traits needed to seek one’s destiny as an athlete in sports such as boxing, track and field, basketball, and football.

As Black men and women have become increasingly successful in a few highly visible sports, young Blacks have focused their attention on developing skills in the same sports. This not only has contributed to the high proportion of Blacks in certain sports but also accounts for the tendency among many young Black males to put all their motivational eggs into just a few sport baskets. Because they haven’t had the chance to see payoffs connected with education, they conclude that running and jumping offer the best chances for fame and fortune. Therefore, many of them dedicate themselves to being the best runners and jumpers around. Unfortunately, outside of a couple of sports, occupational opportunities for runners and jumpers are very limited.

# 7.7. Sports as sites for transforming racial attitudes

Are sports contexts in which personal prejudices can be broken down, dominant racial ideologies challenged, and intergroup relations improved on both personal and institutional levels?

Research shows that contact between people from different racial and ethnic groups can lead to favorable changes on a personal level when members of each group

* have equal status
* pursue the same goals
* depend on one another’s cooperation to achieve their goals
* receive positive encouragement for interacting with one another in supportive ways

Even though these conditions exist in many sports, there are at least three reasons to be cautious before concluding that interaction in sports reduces prejudice:

* 1. When people are in the habit of using racial and ethnic ideologies to explain what happens in their worlds, they resist changing those ideologies.
  2. Contact between members of different racial and ethnic groups in sports is often so superficial that it fails to break down prejudices, or challenge ideologies, or change people’s behaviors, especially off-the-field behaviors.
  3. The competition that occurs within and between teams may aggravate existing prejudices among players and spectators and lead them to perpetuate hostile and destructive ideologies.

## Racial and ethnic ideologies resist change

When people use particular sets of ideas to interpret what goes on in the world, they often go to great lengths to defend and preserve those ideas, thinking that without them, the world would not make any sense. In sports, players from one racial or ethnic group may ignore players from other groups and selectively tune out information inconsistent with their pre-existing ideas about race and ethnicity. When forced to interact with players who challenge those ideas, they may define those players as exceptions – not like other Blacks, or whites, or Hispanics, and so on. This allows them to preserve negative racial ideologies while they play sports with teammates from other groups. When information challenges ideologies, they just reinterpret the information so that it supports their negative stereotypes.

## Social contacts in sports are superficial

Despite what many sport fans think, teammates don’t have to be friends with one another to play well. Many teams with serious interpersonal problems among players have won championships. Success requires knowledge of teammates’ playing abilities, but players can gain this knowledge without close personal interaction. In other words, people from different racial and ethnic groups don’t become friends just because they are teammates.

When U.S. sports were first desegregated, Black athletes led lonely lives. They coped with the racism and cautious acceptance of spectators, teammates, and coaches. Off-the-field contacts with teammates were rare, and there were few opportunities for Blacks and whites to share experiences and feelings. As the number of Black athletes has increased in certain sports, friendships between Blacks and whites have become more common, but patterns of racial separateness and self-segregation still exist. These patterns are most likely when whites have little awareness of race-related issues and problems, and when whites or Blacks lack the experiences and the support that would make them feel at ease among people from different racial backgrounds.

Relationships depend on personal communication, and communication depends on acknowledging the reality of other people’s experiences. Unless people are ready to listen to others, share their perspectives, and accept as valid what others say about their experiences, relationships don’t happen. Sports provide opportunities for communication and forming relationships based on racial and ethnic awareness, but athletes don’t seem to take advantage of these opportunities in a way that makes them more likely than other people their age to have friends from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Social life in some U.S. schools involves little social mixing between students from different racial and ethnic groups, and sometimes even involves hostilities and conflicts. Sharing membership on a school team may override this pattern within the special sphere of the team itself, but it doesn’t seem to override it when team members are in non-sport settings.

## Competition often subverts intergroup cooperation

Competition in sports can destroy the common goals needed to challenge racial and ethnic prejudices. When athletes from different racial or ethnic groups are opponents, sports can even become sites for the creation or reaffirmation of stereotypes and negative ideas about race and ethnicity. This is the case for spectators as well.

This should not be surprising. Social psychologists long have used competition to create hostility and negative attitudes between groups in their experiments. They knew that competition consistently evoked negative feelings and that when competitors were from different racial or ethnic groups, existing negative feelings would be intensified during competition.

These patterns also exist in sports. Sport competition can intensify emotions and generate hostile intergroup behavior during events. As one Black student-athlete wrote in a paper on race and sport, "in the heat of sport competition, restraint gives way to raw emotion, and racism takes the place of sportsmanship." He noted that his statement was based on his experiences through years of sport participation.

Race relations expert Richard Lapchick, director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University, has noted that when Black and white athletes meet in sport, they often carry "a great deal of racial baggage ... [and] prejudices are unlikely to evaporate with the sweat as they play together. ...Any display of negative behavior is likely to reinforce existing biases." When this happens, games may be defined in racial terms and even become racial battles.

The effects of competition are not always limited to the members of opposing teams. When teammates from different racial or ethnic backgrounds compete with one another for starting positions and other honors, their personal rivalries may be defined in racial or ethnic terms. When this occurs, coaches are faced with the challenge of defusing potentially dangerous situations. They serve as the mediators for what may be intense racial dynamics among players. For this reason, coaches in many sports need diversity training.

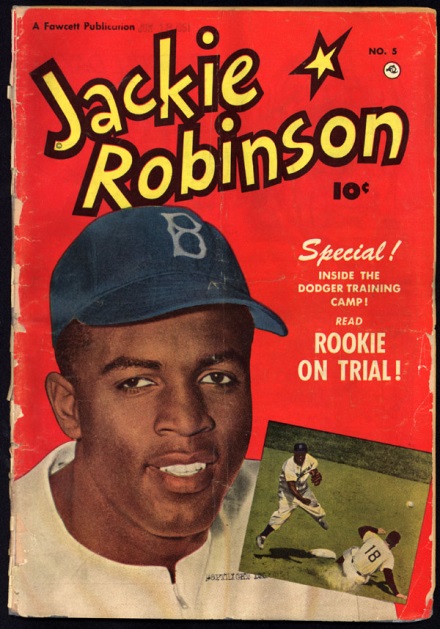
# 8.8. Why aren’t all sports racially and ethnically desegregated?

Desegregating any activity or organization is a complex process. In sports, desegregation has been influenced by the organizational structure of sports and sport teams, the payoffs associated with eliminating policies of exclusion, and the motivation among Black males to take advantage of opportunities to develop certain sport skills.

In discussions of race relations and sport, it is important not to equate desegregation with the elimination of bigoted racial ideologies or with the achievement of true racial integration. Desegregation involves opening doors; true integration occurs when there are unqualified invitations to come through the doors, join the activities going on inside, and participate in making decisions about those activities, regardless of where they are happening or who is involved. Integration depends on deep changes in the social dynamics of race relations.

Jackie Robinson, the first Black man to play in modern major league baseball, recognized the differences between desegregation and true integration when he once remarked that the racist teammates on the Brooklyn Dodgers tolerated him as a fellow athlete only because he "could help fill their wallets." He knew that those teammates never fully accepted him as a human being either on or off the field. The door to sports was opened for Robinson, but he knew there were no unqualified invitations to participate in everything going on inside sports, or in the rest of life outside of sports.

Many things have changed in the seventy-five years since Jackie Robinson signed his first major-league contract, but racial bigotry still exists in sports. The mere fact that Blacks have been accepted as athletes in certain sports does not mean that skin color has lost its relevance in all sports, or in the rest of society. It’s one thing for people to say nice things about Black athletes who run around football fields, basketball courts, and Olympic tracks, but it is quite another thing for them to be comfortable with knowledgeable about racial integration off the playing field and across a wide range of social situations and relationships.

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***When Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers tried to convince other managers and team owners to desegregate Major League Baseball, he told them that it would be financially profitable to do so. His argument was effective.***