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Sports Notes

by
Wornie L. Reed

Myths

Another racial myth came tumbling down in the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea. Blacks had never before been prominent in swimming competitions at the national level in the United States or at the international level. Several theories about the bone structure and body mass of black people have been offered to explain the absence of blacks on the victory stands at these top competitive levels. But at the 1988 Olympics Anthony Nesty, a black man from Surinam (South America), bested Matt Biondi, swimming's golden boy in those Olympics, to win the 100-meter butterfly.

Nesty's feat brings to mind the situation in distance running before the 1960 Olympics. Prior to these games Jimmy-the-Greek type explanations of racial differences in body type were used to explain the black dominance in the sprints and the lack of success by blacks in distance races. However, at the Rome Olympics in 1960, Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia, running barefooted, shocked the world by winning the heralded marathon and breaking the Olympic record by more than eight minutes.

Not even breathing hard at the finish, he explained, "The marathon distance is nothing for me. I could have kept going and gone around the course another time without difficulty. We train in shoes, but it's more comfortable to run without them." In Tokyo in 1964, Bikila set a world record in winning the marathon, this time wearing shoes. Again he was not breathing hard as he followed up his finish with a jog to the infield where he did knee bends, bicycle kicks and other calisthenics.

What Bikila started in 1964 escalated rapidly to the point where Africans won each of the five distance races in the World's Track Meet in 1987, finished first and second in the 1988 Boston Men's Marathon, and won four of the five distance races in the 1988 Olympics. Nowadays we hear no more talk of the black physique being unsuited for distance running.

Money

In many instances salaried black athletic stars have kept a close pace in salary with white stars. However, in off-the-field income—principally commercial endorsements—black athletes are not even close. For example, a month after the 1988 Olympics Jackie Joyner-Kersey, the record setting heptathlete, had not received a single new endorsement offer. Joyner-Kersey, winner of the long jump as well as the heptathlon in the 1988 Olympics, so outclassed her

competitors that in the heptathlon she competed against her own world records and the 7,000 point mark which she is the only person to exceed.

She has won numerous national awards and is heralded by many sportswriters and other experts as the greatest woman athlete in the world. This young woman, who is the quintessential public figure and role model, who also happens to be black, has provoked little commercial interest. White stars of this magnitude have always been able to cash in on their Olympic feats.

This endorsement snub of Joyner-Kersey was a consistent way to end a year that began with the heroics of quarterback Doug Williams in the Superbowl. He shouted "I'm going to Disney World!" into the camera and was paid handsomely for that but he did not get much more—in stark contrast to the endorsements that went to the previous Superbowl hero, Phil Simms. The white quarterback of the New York Giants was reported to have received some \$2 million in endorsements.

Stemming the Tide

Those who have been wondering what organized response there might be to the domination of college basketball by blacks received their answer on January 11, 1988, when the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) approved Proposition 42, prohibiting prospective freshmen athletes from receiving athletic scholarships. Such a rule would disproportionately affect black athletes, who have poorer academic training in high school and less ability to pay their way during the first year of college.

In the early 1970s the popularity of professional basketball in the National Basketball Association (NBA) decreased as the popularity of college basketball increased. The popularity of the NBA decreased despite the increasing virtuosity of the players. As the popularity of college basketball increased, college basketball was also becoming "black."

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In 1983 the NCAA voted in Proposition 48, which stiffened the admissions requirements for athletes. Proposition 48 stipulated that a scholarship freshman could not play on the team if he did not have a C-average from high school, or if he scored less than 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or less than 15 on the American College Test (ACT). However, Proposition 48 allowed a freshman to receive aid if he met either the C-average requirement or the minimum score on either of the college board exams. Proposition 42, an amendment to

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Proposition 48, takes Prop 48 a step further. It would prevent a Prop 48 athlete from receiving a scholarship at all during his freshman year. Since approximately nine out of ten Prop 48 student-athletes are black, this means that blacks would be predominately affected.

Admittedly, these admission requirements are quite low, and it is difficult to argue against improving the quality of education of the student-athletes, but it is also difficult to understand how a new rule

that accepts the admission of students to college but withholds their scholarship aid is anything but a means of accomplishing some other objective. Please note that non-athletes often enter college with these low-threshold academic qualifications. This action is addressed only at certain student-athletes, 90% of whom are black. Some individuals have argued that the presence of two black quarterbacks leading the two top-rated college football teams in the Fiesta Bowl this year was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Two of the more prominent black college basketball coaches, John Thompson of Georgetown and John Chaney of Temple, have taken strong stances against Prop 42. Thompson reacted with press conferences, public and private pressure, and with personal boycotts; and John Chaney has described the vote as intentional racism. It is difficult to see it any other way.