Why Sports History Is American History

by Mark Naison

Athletic Sports, 1887. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

In the classroom, examples from sports can explain key events in American history and help explore how people in American society have grappled with racial, ethnic, and regional differences in our very diverse nation. Whether it is assigning a book on Jack Johnson to illustrate the nationalization of white supremacy during the Jim Crow era or using the movie *Cinderella Man*—about heavyweight champion James Braddock, living on relief a year before he won the title—to show how much stress American families were under during the Great Depression, sports history is a tremendously valuable tool for bringing American history to life.

From the late nineteenth century to our present day, professional and college sports have served as two of the nation's most powerful community-building institutions, helping to define American identity on the grassroots level as powerfully as our political system, our broadcast media, or Hollywood film. In a huge and diverse nation experiencing waves of immigration, struggling with racial divisions, and undergoing a pace of economic change unmatched by any society in the world, the importance of sports cannot be ignored. Sports has provided many Americans with more than a much-needed escape from the hardships of their daily lives; it has given them a visceral connection to our nation's lived traditions and cultural values.

Take an event like the Super Bowl. If a friend visits from another country, what better way to give a four-hour primer on American culture than by watching that game and the spectacle surrounding it? Here are classic themes in American civilization on display in dramatic form: the creative tension between individual striving and team destiny; the fascination with violence and courage in the face of adversity; the glorification of the citizen as consumer; the love of gimmicks and new technologies that highlight the nation's wealth; the use of scantily clad women (in this case cheerleaders) to market products; and finally the nation's racial divisions, symbolized by the spectacle of a largely white stadium audience watching largely black teams play a dangerous and violent game. This is American society with all its grandeur, power, and imperfections, broadcast in a way that commands the attention of almost every person in the nation. Like many sports events throughout our history, it provides important insights into how we think and live, how we entertain ourselves, and how we gather together to celebrate and affirm who we are.

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

What follows are some reflections (including personal reflections) on three key dimensions of sports in American history: its role in socializing and Americanizing immigrants and their children; its role in marginalizing African Americans in the Jim Crow era and then giving blacks a platform from which to challenge their subordination; and its shattering of gender norms on the field without eradicating the objectification of women in the sports marketplace.

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The role of sports in Americanizing immigrants has been written about extensively by historians and journalists. Professional boxing and baseball, both of which achieved heightened popularity at the dawn of the twentieth century, became important vehicles by which waves of immigrants marked their progress in American society. The hero-making machinery of these two sports, enhanced first by mass-circulating newspapers then by radio, allowed for individuals from immigrant backgrounds to achieve the status of popular culture icons while the majority of their ethnic cohorts struggled with poverty and marginality. For European immigrants, even those from eastern and southern Europe, sports—guided by an ethos of fair play and open competition—proved far more accessible to talented immigrant youth than the nation's banks, corporations, and universities where discrimination was often masked behind "gentlemen's agreements," and where progress in breaking barriers was often painfully slow. Boxers John O Sullivan, Jim Corbett, Benny Leonard, and Rocky Marciano and baseball players Joe DiMaggio and Hank Greenberg became symbolic representatives of the potential of Irish, Italian, and Jewish Americans to win success and acceptance in a nation that had often looked on their presence with suspicion. And this filtered down to the neighborhood level where the American-born children of immigrants seized upon sports as a surefire way of affirming their American identities and opening up opportunities for economic and educational success.

During the 1950s, the belief in sports as a true bastion of "democracy" was alive and well in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn where I grew up. In a community where 95 percent of the people were Jewish and Italian and the older generation spoke little or no English, sports assumed almost religious significance among English-speaking boys and men. The men of my father's generation not only discussed sports on street corners, in bars, and at the dinner table, they bet on sports events ranging from horse racing to boxing to basketball through the bookie who was a fixture outside the corner candy store. Sports also dominated the horizons of boys. We followed fanatically the three New York baseball teams—the Dodgers, Yankees, and Giants—and tried to model ourselves on the three centerfielders on those teams, Willie Mays, Duke Snider, and Mickey Mantle. When we reached our teens, we practiced basketball even more, aware that many older guys in our neighborhood were playing on high school teams and that some had gotten scholarships to play in college. We watched Sunday pro football and the Friday night fights, practicing moves we saw there in the sometimes brutal brawls we had in alleys and occasionally in school as well as in equally brutal sandlot football games.

Yet what I most remember about all of the games watched and played was the sense that America was ours for the conquering. We believed that if we got good enough at our sport, there was no height to which we couldn't ascend. After all, Gordon, Koufax, Furillo, Rizzuto, and Berra had reached the pinnacle of professional sports and people just like them were stars at every Brooklyn high school. Did we think this way about presidents and senators, mayors and members of Congress? I doubt it. None of us knew anyone who had succeeded in politics let alone run for office. But asked if we believed in American democracy, all of us would have said "yes" without the slightest hesitation. We would have pointed to sports as proof that America was the land of opportunity for people just like us.

Looking at the teams and athletes we rooted for, we would have also said that American democracy applied to blacks as much as it did to Jews and Italians. Living seven blocks from Ebbets Field and coming of age a full ten years after the Dodgers broke major league baseball's color line, my friends and I could marvel at the exploits of Dodger stars Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, and Don Newcombe. And, although we hated the Giants, we all tried to make basket catches in the style of Willie Mays. Of equal significance to the basketball fanatics among us, many of the great high school players in Brooklyn of that era were black, as were some of the participants in our schoolyard games. We looked on NBA

players like Elgin Baylor, Oscar Robertson, and Bill Russell as models for the developing games that we hoped would take us to college stardom.

However, as I would learn later when I studied sports history, the concepts of meritocracy and fair play were more exceptions than rules for African Americans. During the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans were barred from participating in most professional sports leagues no matter what their talent level, and unable to play on most college and recreational teams. Nowhere was this racial caste system more visible than in Major League Baseball, which drew the color line from the first World Series in 1903 until Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. This was not because African Americans didn't play baseball at the highest level or because white players and coaches weren't aware of their talent. At the turn of the century, baseball was the single most popular sport in black communities throughout the nation, and the pool of black talent was deep and strong. The best white major leaguers knew this because they competed against the best black players in winter leagues in Cuba and in off-season sandlot games where black players more than held their own.

Yet, over time, sports would become an important arena in the battles against segregation and racial discrimination. In the 1930s, boxing and track and field—two sports in which segregation was never as complete as it was in baseball—produced two black athletes who became genuine American sports heroes: Jesse Owens and Joe Louis. In both instances, these athletes won their victories against athletes from an ascendant Nazi Germany, a nation whose racial theories stigmatized much of America's immigrant population as racial inferiors. Jesse Owens's victories at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and Joe Louis's 1938 victory over Max Schmeling at Yankee Stadium marked the first time in American history that large numbers of white Americans perceived a black athlete as fighting for them, and joyously celebrated their triumphs. These moments helped set the stage for the gradual steps taken by coaches at schools like NYU, UCLA, and the City College of New York to recruit black players for their football and basketball teams as well as for the much bigger step taken by Major League Baseball executive Branch Rickey to integrate the national pastime.

It was not a miraculous rise in the number of talented black athletes but changes in the political climate in the nation and the world that led to the integration of sports. Throughout the segregated eras of 1930s and into the 1940s, the best white major league baseball and professional basketball players knew how good black athletes were for they competed against—and often lost to—all-black teams. In the early 1930s, the legendary all-white New York Celtics basketball team played and lost as many games as they won against the all-black Harlem Renaissance Five. Later in the decade, the Harlem Globetrotters, whose skill level was as impressive as their comedy, won the majority of their games against professional teams. The same was true in contests between barnstorming groups of major league players and black teams like the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays. Satchel Paige was a legendary figure among white major leaguers well before he was signed to play for the Cleveland Indians in 1948. There wasn't a white player who competed against him who didn't think that if the color line broke, he would be an instant star.

The history of how gender barriers were broken in sports follows a somewhat different trajectory. For women, the story is not about how female sports talent was kept out of competition; it is a story of a powerful gender system that insisted participation in sports was inappropriate because it would masculinize women. For most of the twentieth century, women were socialized to believe that competitive sports was a male domain, and they were given few opportunities to develop their own athletic talent. It was not until the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the passage of Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that women as an organized political force began to define sports participation as a women's rights issue and to insist that girls have the same opportunity to participate in

sports as boys. Through protests, legal challenges, and community-level campaigns, women's sports have expanded to become an integral part of organized athletics at every level.

How dramatic, and how recent this change is can be demonstrated by what took place within my own family. My wife never had a chance to play competitive sports. My daughter, born in 1977, could throw, hit and catch as well as any neighborhood boy, and she did have the chance to play—yet only on existing boys' teams at first. By the time she was fourteen, however, girls softball, basketball, and soccer leagues had sprung up all over Brooklyn. Girls had the choice of either playing with boys or playing on an all-girls team. By the time my daughter graduated from high school, most American colleges, thanks to Title IX challenges and lawsuits, had as many female as male teams and she had a choice of playing college basketball, softball, or tennis. Problems, of course, remain. The most popular and highly publicized professional sports—football, baseball, and basketball—are still overwhelmingly male domains. And, the images of women offered in "swimsuit issues" of sports magazines still present a stark contrast to the image of talented competitors like Billie Jean King or Mia Hamm. Yet today a young girl growing up has almost as many sports opportunities as a boy. She sees models of women athletes in her school, neighborhood, and on television.

For historians, there is no better way to teach students about the creation and destruction of the color and gender lines in twentieth-century America than to draw examples from the history of race and gender in sports, a history which is now richly documented in biographies, historical works, novels, and documentary film. Educators can see how useful an examination of sports can be in raising important themes in American history. Sports history provides a point of entry into American culture. Let the games begin!

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INTERNET RESOURCES

PBS delivers some websites, links to other websites, and classroom materials for the study of sports in America. You might want to start with the one for Ken Burns's film on Jack Johnson, *Unforgivable Blackness*:
http://www.pbs.org/unforgivableblackness/teachers/

"The Fight" from *American Experience* will lead to materials on the Louis-Schmeling match, including a time line, a gallery, sketches of "people and events," and suggestions for teachers:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/fight/index.html

Ken Burns's *Baseball* also has a website for teachers, including a section on related PBS lessons, with materials on matters as diverse as Joe DiMaggio, Caribbean-born baseball players, and baseball-related lesson plans for math:
http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/baseball/teachers/

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