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Book review

When race matters

Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk About It; Jon Entine, Public Affairs Press, New York, 2000, 288 pp., ISBN 1-891620-39-8

White men can't jump. Asian men can't either. But according to Jon Entine's new book, Black men (and women) can sky! Entine, an Emmy-winning producer for NBC News and winner of a National Press Club Award, shows that in almost every sport in which Black athletes are given an equal opportunity to compete, they dominate. But why?

The politically correct explanation for Black athletic success, especially in running, basketball, and football — limited opportunity elsewhere, coupled with hard work — just can't explain the magnitude of the race effect in sports. The decisive variable is mean genetic differences shaped by thousands of years of evolution.

Entine dares to write what others only whisper, that many Black athletes openly acknowledge their natural advantage. O.J. Simpson, while still a role model to Blacks and Whites in 1977 when playing for the Buffalo Bills, said, "We are built a little differently, built for speed — skinny calves, long legs, high asses are all characteristics of blacks". Arthur Ashe, Jr, the African American tennis player, whose book A Hard Road to Glory (1988), provided a sweeping history of the Black athlete, said, "Sociology can't explain it. I want to hear from the scientists. I have to believe that we blacks have something that gives us an edge".

The physiological facts, known to all specialists in the area are: Compared to whites, blacks have narrower hips which gives them a more efficient stride. They have longer legs which makes for a longer stride. They have a shorter sitting height which provides a higher center of gravity and a better balance. They have wider shoulders, less body fat, and more muscle. Their muscles include more fast twitch muscles which produce power.

Blacks have from 3 to 19% more of the sex hormone testosterone than Whites or East Asians. These testosterone differences translate into more explosive energy, which gives Blacks the edge in sports like boxing, basketball, football, and sprinting. However some of these race differences, like heavier bone mass and smaller chest cavities, pose a problem for Black swimmers.

Race differences show up early in life. Black babies are born a week earlier than White babies, yet they are more mature as measured by amniotic fluid, bone development, and other indices. By age 5 or 6, Black children excel in the dash, the long jump, and the high jump, all of which require a short burst of power. By the teenage years, Blacks have faster reflexes, as in the famous kneejerk response.

East Asians run even less well than Whites. These same narrow hips, longer legs, more muscle, and more testosterone that give Blacks an advantage over Whites, give Whites an advantage over East Asians. But acknowledging the existence of genetic differences in sports leads to the greater

taboo area — the possibility of race differences in brain size and crime. (Hips have expanded in Whites and especially East Asians to allow birth to larger brained offspring; testosterone predisposes to antisocial behavior; Rushton, 1995). That is why it is taboo to even say that Blacks are better at many sports.

The biggest problem with the book, perhaps the result of the author's distinguished background in television production, is the tendency to go in and out of focus. The myriad attempts to soften the story, or simply to entertain, result in long anecdotes, preachy sermons about the evils of racism, unnecessary quotations, and other digressions, that blur the critical focus. The result is a book that, while entertaining, is sometimes hard to follow.

When it does get into its stride, however, *Taboo* moves along at a fair clip. Regarding sports, if there is a level playing field in athletics, it is the earth — literally. Running is highly meritocratic. Technique and strategy are less important than quickness, speed, leaping ability, endurance and power. Yet, even as the competitors in the Olympics and World Championships have become more diverse, with participants from almost every nation on earth, the skin pigmentation of the winners has become increasingly uniform. Whites and Asians are in danger of becoming literal 'also rans'. Distance running and jumping are becoming "black only" events.

Consider the startling case of Kenya. No country has so dominated one sport as Kenya has endurance running. Since picking up its first medal at the 1964 Olympics, Kenya has amassed 40 Olympic medals including 13 gold in men's races — a feat exceeded by only one country — the sprint-rich US, with a population ten times larger than Kenya. In the past three Olympics, Kenyans have swept 22 medals, all at distances 800-m and longer. The only sports achievement of comparable magnitude is the stranglehold on sprinting by athletes who trace their ancestry to Central West Africa.

In short, Entine persuasively shows why biology and ancestry are significant components in explaining the stunning ascension of Black athletes. He also offers a gripping history of Blacks in sports and a fascinating examination of human evolution and the political circumstances that have made even discussing these well known facts so difficult and controversial (cf. Jensen 1998, Levin 1997, Rushton 1995). And in the end, Entine definitively proves that race matters whether we like it or not.

References

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