Hoberman's Fantasy: How Neoconservative Writing on Sport Reinforces Perceptions of Black Inferiority and Preserves the Myth of Race

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The visiting black MIT-trained economist, holder of an endowed chair named after a leading civil rights activist, was approached by a blond, blue-eyed Australian teenager at a traditional feast of stewed mutton-bird and barbecued wallaby at an Aboriginal higher education conference in Tasmania. The teenager wanted to know from what country the visitor had traveled; was the visitor Aborigine or African American? Upon learning that the academic visitor was black and from the United States, the teenager gleefully inquired whether the guest played basketball. A former competitive swimmer, the professor replied, “No.” Dejected from the negative response, the teenager then asked, “But, do you know Michael Jordan?”

Anyone reading John Hoberman's *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* will find ample support for the thesis that sport has contributed to racialized discourse in all corners of the globe—even in Tasmania. If you believed that blacks were more violent than whites, that black families are more apt to abuse their children, that the myth of black physical and athletic superiority has contributed to the elevation of sport over intellectual pursuits in black America, then you will find all of the arcane evidence that you could ever hope to amass in this book.

As the exchange between the professor and the teenager illustrates, there persist, even in far-off places like Tasmania, notions of black athletic prowess that reinforce racist images of blacks. One can then take the questionable leap to conclude that, therefore, black intellectual inferiority is reinforced by glorification of black athletics. This is what Hoberman does in his overhyped, inflammatory treatise. *Darwin's Athletes* provides a running commentary on the divide between black physical attributes and the alleged mental and intellectual defects of African Americans. The writer of this review concludes that the book does nothing more than excite the fantasies that indeed blacks are intellectually inferior, while simultaneously

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giving hope to whites that blacks may not be genuinely athletically endowed in the superior manner supposed by the old-style racists the book’s author attempts to confront. Whether intentionally or out of naive ignorance of the sensibilities of African Americans, Hoberman has managed through his pseudoscientific analysis of sport to reinforce ideas of black intellectual inferiority and to preserve the myth of race.

Like many such neoconservative diatribes against the black community, Darwin’s Athletes contains some kernels of truth. When the aforementioned black professor became the first black captain of a prestigious high school swim team, the white neophyte coach wondered aloud whether it was possible for blacks to float and whether the larger feet of blacks might explain why they might make great breaststokers but not good distance swimmers. The coach, conceding that the selection of the black captain might spur on the white team members to success, sternly reminded the African American team leader that “Negroes are only good for three things: Singing, Dancing and Sport. You cannot sing, you cannot dance. So, sports is your life.”

Anecdotes of this sort are found scattered throughout the book. Yes, racism exists in sport, and yes, there are some racist coaches. There are even more anecdotes, however, often highly inflammatory ones, about black acquiescence and complicity in these forces that glorify sport. Absent, however, are the stories of coaches like Ralph Waldo Emerson Jones, Jr., son of the famed Grambling president and baseball scout, who studied under Indiana’s swimming legend Counsilman. Coach Jones is remembered as the winning swimming coach at Morgan State College who produced not only record-setting CIAA (Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association) teams, but who also sent off to graduate school, medical school, dental school, and into corporate America scores of successful black academic scholars. When Coach Jones recruited the aforementioned professor out of the high school championships, he promised the rising athlete, whose high school grade point average was a mere 67.9, that even if the swimmer never swam another day of his life, the coach would support him academically and see to it that he graduated. Other recruiters from ACC (Atlantic Coast Conference) schools promised girls, fun, and more. The black coach from the local black college promised a good education, character development, discipline, and an opportunity to have a life after sports.

The persistent failure of Darwin’s Athletes to acknowledge and explore these positive aspects of sports on black America is a conspicuous aspect of the book. It arises from the author’s ignorance of these multifold experiences repeated and canonized throughout the community of color. Special pains are taken, however, to discount these pieces of evidence even when the author is confronted with them. One wonders, for example, why, even when mention is made in passing of Paul Robeson’s and W. Montague Cobb’s athletic successes, nothing is made of the intimate relationship be-
tween their athletic and professional successes. Hoberman's mention of Jesse Owens focuses on his anatomy, not on the academic talents that preceded his athletic achievements.

Essentially, Hoberman has written a 341-page opinion piece. Packed with 53 pages of footnotes and 22 pages of bibliographic references, and filled with academic-sounding jargon from the medical anthropology literature, the book might at first glance appear to be honest scholarship. Ultimately, however, it is nothing more than amusing speculation, imaginative guesswork, and fanciful fiction. It contributes to the reinforcement of negative imagery of black mental inferiority through an unbalanced and hostile analysis of blacks in sports. The book is biased, one-sided, and invidious.

Moreover, if you believe that black intellectuals are to blame for the ascension of sport over academics, then you will find just the convoluted logic you need to support your case. No matter how valid or accurate some of the observations are about damaging and self-destructive behaviors among black males, the book's overall point, that black pathology is a result of black sport, is an unfortunate and inflamed attack on black intelligence and on the black intelligentsia.

To make his point that black sport is ruining black America, Hoberman resorts to all manner of attacks on black leaders and black intellectuals, claiming that they have been negligent in failing to point out the pitfalls of excessive preoccupation with athleticism over academics. Relentless in his attack on alleged anti-intellectualism within the black community, Hoberman resorts to malicious misquotations of Allain Locke and Langston Hughes, who both decried the "old fashioned moral and pedagogical concepts" found in many Negro schools. What Hoberman fails to tell the reader is that Locke and Hughes were assailing against white-dominated institutions of higher learning for blacks. Howard University, for example, the academic home of Locke, did not receive its first black president until the days of Mordecai Johnson. Without reference to Woodson's classic, The Mis-education of the Negro, allusions to black hostility toward black schools are likely to be taken out of context.

Hoberman has no obvious interest in or ability to grasp the undervalued and underappreciated perspectives of African Americans themselves. When Hoberman approvingly quotes Shelby Steele—whose views support his own—and completely ignores the important scholarly research of his psychologist twin brother, Claude Steele, Hoberman starkly exposes his conservative agenda. Claude Steele's writings would reveal the underlying racist causes of poor academic achievement not in sport or in the excesses of black pathology, but within highly sophisticated forms of expectation formation. Exploring Claude Steele's research on student performance would require Hoberman to de-emphasize the alleged causal effects of sport and to confront directly the racist expectations that manifest themselves in sport and elsewhere.
Hoberman's apparent fixation with several isolated quotations from Glenn Loury—quotations that reappear virtually in identical form in several places in the book—and his insistent attacks on most other black intellectuals raises the suspicion that he desires approval from certain quarters of the conservative community. He goes out of his way to denounce the ignorance and hail the stupidity of black writers with whom he disagrees. For example, speaking of Cornel West, he writes:

It is a measure of West's estrangement from the realities of the black sports world that he addresses the stylistic impact of black athletes on young whites rather than their more baneful influence on the career aspirations of young blacks. (Hoberman, p. 86)

On a roll, he then maligns Michael Eric Dyson:

If Cornel West does not really engage with the issue of black athleticism, another commentator [Dyson] embraces it with such fervor that he becomes conceptually disoriented in the process. (Hoberman, p. 86)

These are just a sampling of the demeaning and patronizing remarks that Hoberman makes about black intellectuals. He has even anointed himself the arbiter of who is and who is not an intellectual by referring to Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka as "intellectual outsiders." What is more curious, however, especially coming from an academic whose reputation presumably rests on acknowledgment of peers with knowledge of the field, is the systematic failure to incorporate the writings of established African American scholars' writing on various aspects that are relevant to the author's thesis. When speaking of pathology in the black family, Hoberman does not mention Harriet McAdoo, Robert Hill, or Andrew Billingsley, whose writings provide clarity and precision to the counterpoint of resiliency within the black community. When speaking of black scholarship at the turn of the century, no mention is made of Kenneth Manning's award-winning Black Apollo of Science, a study that would provide sorely needed insights into the era of Howard University's development and a background on one of the founders of Omega Psi Phi, microbiologist E. E. Just.

There is an endless regurgitation of myths and stereotypes of black violence, black pathology, black anatomy, and black sexual habits. Largely unexplored is the reality of the black experience in America or the diversity of black perspectives on sport and elevation of sports figures in society. One yearns for a careful, objective, dispassionate study that rigorously tests the many competing hypotheses about the linkage between poor academic performance and athletic glorification. This book does not provide it.

There is extraordinary reliance on the white popular media and white opinion pieces to craft the arguments advanced. One wonders why or how the Chicago Tribune or the New York Times suddenly became an authority on hazing in black fraternities and the differences in skin color between
members of Omega Psi Phi and Alpha Phi Alpha. No reference is made to Charles Wesley's pioneering research on black fraternal organizations and no attempt is made to place the pledging of black fraternities into the context of African ritual.

There is highly selective use of academic evidence. Hoberman quotes Hampton and Gelles to support his contention that blacks are more violent than whites, but then he does not acknowledge Giovannoli and Becerra, who find that white parents consistently view specific instances of child maltreatment less seriously than black parents do. Hoberman also declines to mention that the most accurate analysis of child abuse is found in the National Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect Studies (NIS) and that these analyses find no racial differences in violence against children. The careful empirical analysis of Benedict College and University of Minnesota researcher Sheila Ards shows consistently that one cannot unambiguously conclude blacks are more violent than whites from existing evidence on child abuse and neglect.

On balance, this book ought to offend those who detest the graphic depiction of the details of African and African American sexual appetite and intellectual inferiority rendered with titillating enthusiasm by a writer who seems to obtain genuine voyeuristic delight from reveling in this pseudoscientific nostalgia. The pervasive characterization of black inferiority coming from a writer who professes to expose racism and debunk the myth of race reminds one of the sickening enjoyment that hypocritical censors of pornography can be imagined to obtain when weeding out smut. The best line of the entire book, and quite revealing of the weakened form of scholarship adopted by the author, is found in Hoberman's critique of theories of racial athletic aptitude:

The difference between tabloid science and genuine science is that real scientists do not streamline their presentations and feign omniscience in order to excite their readers. (Hoberman, p. 206)

Hoberman's book reads like tabloid science.

The black professor returned to Australia the following year. He repeated the story of the blue-eyed blond Tasmanian. Certain that this was evidence of white fixation with black sports, the visitor was chastened to learn from his Aboriginal host—the first black Australian to reach the rank of full professor and the only black Australian dean—that the blue-eyed blond was a Tasmanian Aborigine. The teenager's excitement was about the legitimate marriage between athletics and academics. After all, Michael Jordan did attend college, an illusive goal for many Aborigine youth, even blue-eyed, blond ones. One is reminded that sports helped the visitor reach those academic heights, just as sports helped the senior host. The black Australian host reached heights that the teenager aspired to by being a star footballer who exploited his natural athletic abilities to obtain a good ed-
ucation, discipline, and highly developed character. Sports is not the problem. Racism is.

REFERENCES


