

SPORTS

Are Black athletes really superior?

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Sports Editor

Black versus White? Who can jump the highest? Run the fastest? Hit the farthest? Shoot the best? Is there really a big difference in the natural athletic ability of whites and Blacks? Everybody from scholars to guys on the nine to five work shift, to athletes themselves talk about and try to explain the question of Black superiority in athletics.

According to a study which appeared in the December 1974 issue of *Ebony* magazine, a physical education specialist at the University of Iowa, Eleanor Metheny, said that because of their "longer legs and arms" Black athletes had advantages in running events, shot putting and the high jump.

Also, during the 1964 Olympics in Rome, Jim Tanner, a professor of growth and development at the University of London, studied participants and reported that "the pelvises of Black athletes were smaller which caused less wind-resistance for them than whites."

Another scientist, Morris Stegerda, a physical anthropologist, has offered "proof" that Blacks



Photo by Sports Information, UNC-CH Caldwell: "I think it depends on the individual and his environment."

tend to be taller in stature and have longer arm and leg measurements than whites. They are heavier in body weight due to higher bone density and have wider hand and foot measurements, shallower and less developed chests.

But some of the greatest athletes have disproven these theories not in words but in body. For example, Jesse Owens, whose Olympic exploits caused so much interest to be aroused concerning Black athletes, did not have those typical characteristics mentioned previously. In 1936 Dr. Montague Cobb of Howard University said, "Jesse Owens, who has run faster and leaped farther than any human being has ever done before (1936 and earlier) does not have what is considered the Negroid type of calf, or foot, or heel bone."

Another star, Phil Ford, a member of the 1976-77 All-American basketball team and a U.S. Olympic Gold medalist says, "If you compare bodies of athletes, for instance, my legs are skinnier than John Kuester's and Walter Davis' are the same way. People say all

Blacks are strong and can jump, but I have short arms, little hands, little legs and can't jump and I'm not strong. I can't even dunk the ball. People say I have the white man's disease because I can't jump. But if you look at white players such as Billy Cunningham, Brad Davis and Bill Walton—they can all jump!"

However, Mike O'Koren, 6'7" UNC forward contends, "From what I've seen, the idea that Blacks can jump seems to be true. All the Black guys that I played against in Jersey could jump. But I don't think it goes for everybody. Some people say that all Blacks can play basketball, but there are some Black guys who can't put the ball in the ocean."

Another researcher, Dr. Ernst Jok, who directed the Exercise Research Laboratories at the University of Kentucky, developed the theory that Blacks have enormously underdeveloped capacity (for athletics) due to their late coming into emancipation. He claims that with emancipation the Blacks discovered by trial and error what their capabilities were and once they were found, those abilities were cultivated.

"I think it depends on the individual and his environment," says football star Alan Caldwell. "It would be wrong for me to say Blacks are superior. Blacks have been used to football, track and basketball, but I think if tennis was introduced to Blacks sooner, there would be more Black tennis players. I've run across a lot of good white athletes as well as Black athletes. I'm better at some things than they are and they are better at some things than I am."

Harry Edwards, architect of the Black protest at the 1968 Olympics and author of *Revolt of the Black Athlete* does not accept the theory of Black athletic superiority. Edwards, a professor of sociology at the University of

"I don't think that notion (of superiority) should be promoted at all."

California at Berkeley, says "innate capacity" implies that Blacks need only exercise their innate physical abilities to become successful athletes.

"There are a number of psychological, political and racial hurdles to conquer before one becomes a Bill Russell or a Hank Aaron," he says.

According to Edwards, genetic heritage does not determine Black athletic superiority but determination to overcome arbitrary and deliberate contrived barriers to Black success.

O'Koren says, "I don't think Blacks have anything over whites. I think everybody's equal. Psychologists always say whites are smarter than Blacks and I don't believe that. In pro ball I think Blacks and whites are playing for the same thing, but when you get lower, like in high school or grade school, I think the race issue comes in."

Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, Black assistant professor of psychiatry at

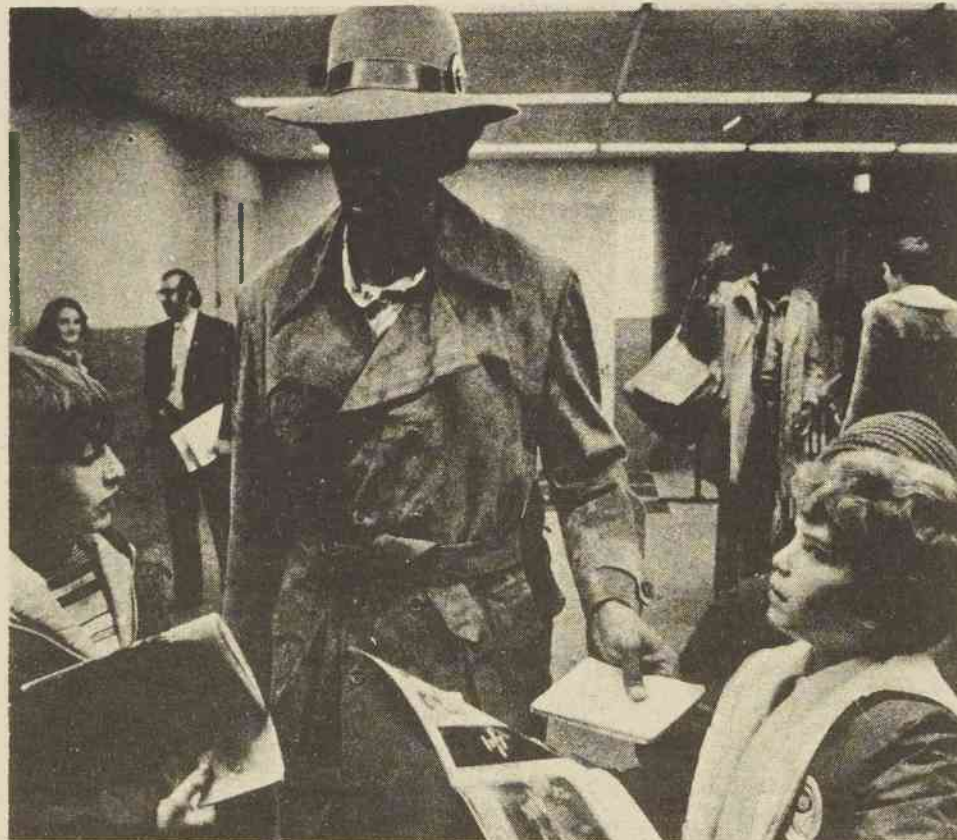


Photo reprinted from *Ebony* Magazine

Basketball star Julius Erving conversing with young white admirers: natural superiority?

Harvard University, agrees with Edwards and O'Koren that the idea of innate physical ability should not be accepted. "I don't think it's safe and I don't think that notion should be promoted at all—for a number of reasons," he notes. "Frequently there is this whole business implied that Blacks are better in athletics because they are 'more animal' therefore they can excel in sports, but aren't good at doing things with the brain."

"It is important for Black kids to show their prowess through physical activity. They will be attracted toward that field and work very hard at it. Athletics has been a primary channel for 'Black aggression.' Blacks will play harder when they get out on the field because this is a sort of a legitimate way to get back at whites."

Ford says, "We play together to win here. I'm not out trying to prove to Mike O'Koren that because I'm Black I'm a better basketball player. And he isn't trying to prove something because he's white."

"I can't really say if a Black athlete is more superior than a white athlete. Just because he's Black doesn't mean he's a good



Photo by Sports Information, UNC-CH O'Koren: "Some Black guys can't put the ball in the ocean."

athlete and if he's white doesn't mean he's a bad athlete. You just can't use race as a basis for athletic ability."

Jo Jo White of the Boston Celtics says, "I know that we are just as superior a race as the whites. In fighting or boxing you watch

"I don't think Blacks have anything over Whites."

and you say, 'Wow, this white guy beat this Black guy. How the hell did that happen!' In athletics, when you're being compared Black against white, you feel that you've got to be that much better than the white guy to even be recognized. If you're on the same level, nine times out of ten they're going to take the white guy over the Black guy, simply because there are more Black athletes than whites who are doing well."

"I see people as people and I just wish everybody would forget about color because race doesn't matter to me," says O'Koren. "I have a lot of Black friends in Jersey because so many of them lived around my neighborhood. I grew up in the projects and I didn't have money to spend when coming up, but I like city life."

"In Jersey, the Blacks would play in the school yards against guys who were good, but the whites in the suburbs would have a goal on the garage or something and just shoot with themselves or their fathers. So the Blacks played against good competition on the school yard courts where everybody was and the whites were by themselves."

"But for the guys in my area, the Blacks would play in Audobon Park and the whites in St. Joseph's School yard and sometimes five or six Black guys would come over to our court and we would go over to the park to play them. Some of the Blacks would say that whites couldn't play, but I got my respect

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