

Should Blacks' Participation in Sports be Limited to Chess?

By B.B. Robinson, Ph.D.

Black athletes possess powerhouse status in the world of sports. Legendary black athletes dominate the record books.

The Society for American Baseball Research's "100 Greatest Baseball Players" list, for example, includes Hank Aaron, Reggie Jackson and Willie Mays, among others. Marshall Faulk currently holds the NFL's record for the most touchdowns in a season while the MVP list contains superstar players such as Randall Cunningham and Lynn Swann. No one will ever forget basketball greats such as Wilt Chamberlin, Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. Arthur Ashe and Tiger Woods essentially broke the color barrier in the country club sports of tennis and golf, with Ashe winning several Grand Slam tournaments in the 1970s and Woods becoming the youngest player to win the U.S. Masters Golf Tournament.

No one can argue that blacks cannot perform athletically.

But is there a downside to all of those meritorious sports accomplishments?

For one thing, it leads many black youth to spend an inordinate amount of time practicing to become the next great sports superstar. They will sometimes trade time for schoolwork and job opportunities for that one-in-a-million shot at glory on the playing field.

Furthermore, black athletes spend a lifetime competing against each other. This builds a natural animosity toward other blacks, including those with whom it may someday be necessary to work cooperatively as adult citizens.

The media also tells blacks and the rest of the world that the one thing about which one can be certain is that blacks will come together when a big game is on the line. This is irrespective of the hell that might be unleashed in their own communities.

Additionally, those who forsake their education and do make it in professional sports send a false and negative message to black youths. It implies that sports rather than education is the way to get ahead in the world.

Black athletes who become overnight millionaires also often buy their big, new homes in the suburbs, far away from the communities of their origin. They take away the very substance that is needed to revive black communities. They enrich the lives of agents that handle their affairs, construction firms that build their houses, automobile dealers that provide their cars and others who have no relationship with black communities.

This may not be a "brain drain," but it certainly is a "wealth drain."

Or perhaps it truly is a brain drain. Imagine transforming all of the energy, ability, desire and talent in America's top athletes into energy, ability, desire and talent for learning and knowledge. Without question, and to the extent that blacks don't already occupy these spaces, blacks would hold their own and most likely exceed the brightest scholars in America today.

It's almost scary - in a very positive way - what would come from such a transformation.

Some may argue that blacks choose to excel where opportunities are presented. It may be true that, in earlier times, a sports career was one's only ticket out of poverty. Today, however, available opportunities within our reach also exist in information and knowledge.

Transfix the black mind on learning and knowledge with the same gusto that we have pursued sports, and I assure you that there will be no lack of opportunity - economically, politically, socially or otherwise.

This brings us back to the one sport that we should not give up - chess. With its emphasis on logic and tactical approaches, it's a sport that can teach us volumes about how to respond strategically to our ever-changing world.

A failure to de-emphasize athletic sports and to re-emphasize learning and knowledge may place black Americans - in the language of chess - in a "checkmate" position.

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