

Ethnicity and Sport

Ethnic diversity has long since been a feature of British society. This diversity has come about due to a number of historical reasons: invasion, expansion through Empire and Commonwealth, and Britain's role as a haven for people fleeing persecution. Indeed about 45,000 Poles settled in Britain after the Second World War. In the section below, however, we will not be considering the influence of groups such as the Irish, Poles, Chinese, or Ukrainians who have settled in Britain in significant numbers. This is partly because little research is available on the specific impact of these groups in sport. Instead we will look at the relationship between sport and the social construction of race, focusing on black sportsmen and women. This is an area where, as Andy Hansen explains in [a review of 'The British at Play'](#) in this edition, "sport can challenge as well as confirm social stereotypes".

Immigration up to the Second World War

The relationship between sport and ethnicity cannot be understood without reference to the history of black and Asian immigration to the United Kingdom. Historians have traced a black presence in British society back to Roman times (an African division of the Roman army was stationed at Hadrian's Wall in the 3rd century), and an Elizabethan parliament in 1596 limited the number of black people entering Britain. Immigration up to the mid-twentieth century, however, was limited to small numbers of blacks, Chinese, and Asians in ports like London, Cardiff, Bristol, and Liverpool (which had been one of the centres of the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).

The first noticeable impact of black sportsmen in Britain occurred after the American War of Independence (1775-1783), and in the sport of boxing. Following the capture of the town of Richmond the British General Percy took from there a black slave, whom he named Bill Richmond, and groomed him as a prize-fighter on the European circuit. Others followed, such as Tom Molyneaux, Peter Jackson, and Andrew Jephtha, usually from outposts of the Empire, with Jephtha being the first black boxer to hold a British Title (1907) The most famous black sportsman of the era was the boxer Randolph Turpin (born in England in 1928 to an English mother and immigrant Guyanese father), who became world middleweight champion in 1951 when he defeated the great Sugar Ray Robinson. His decline into bankruptcy was a fate which befell many boxers, and ended with his suicide, (or gangland murder, depending on who you believe) in 1966.

In athletics a number of sprinters from the British Caribbean made a name for themselves in the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the late 1950's (Wharton, London, Bailey, Wint). There were cricketers too, like Learie Constantine for Trinidad, who played in Lancashire between the wars. In their sports, however, these were all exceptions, perceived as exotic curiosities, and thus not seen as

a threat to the larger community.

The Impact of Post-War Immigration (1945-70)

The Second World War changed all this. Black and Asian servicemen who remained in Britain after the war were joined by several waves of immigrants, beginning in June 1948 when 492 Jamaicans arrived at Tilbury Docks on the Empire Windrush, until by 1958 there were about 125,000 West Indians and 55,000 Asians. The National Health Service, transport, textile industries, and service industries welcomed these immigrants as part of Britain's attempts to rebuild its shattered economy. While the initial motive for coming to Britain was often for the male head of the household to return home with a substantial sum of money saved, economic realities meant that within a few years family and relatives were coming to Britain to join their menfolk. By 1967, this was the reason for nine out of ten immigrant entries. A final major phase of immigration took place between 1968 and 1974 when over 70,000 Kenya and Ugandan Asians arrived in Britain seeking refuge after their livelihoods had been threatened in those countries. By 1974, then, there were over one million black and Asian immigrants in Britain.

Today official government figures claim that 3.3 million Britons (just under 6% of the population) are from a minority ethnic community (defined as 'black African, black Caribbean, black other, Chinese, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, other Asian' - Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1999). Approximately half of these people have been born in the UK. A full picture of ethnic diversity in Britain's population can be seen from [Foreign and Commonwealth sources](#).

Racial Tensions

The process of accommodating the new immigrants did not go smoothly. Settling often in poor, inner-city areas where housing was cheap, many immigrants had to accept jobs well below their skills and qualifications. Prejudice and discrimination from employers, workmates, and landlords became a feature of the immigrant experience. Congregating in areas for safety and friendship, ethnic enclaves grew up, like Brixton in London, or Handsworth in Birmingham. These areas then became the focal point for racial tensions, most famously in the Nottingham and Notting Hill riots of 1958. Race also became a major political issue, reflected in the Conservative politician Enoch Powell, who harnessed and encouraged anti-immigrant sentiments. He warned that integration was impossible and that because of "the immigrants and their offspring.... the character of the country will have changed beyond recognition" (speech to Conservative Party Conference, October 1968). The inflammatory rhetoric he used ("Like the Roman, I see the River Tiber foaming with much blood", Birmingham 1968) encouraged extremism, and this was exploited by racist organisations such as the British National Front.

Although Powell lost his place in the Cabinet, successive Labour and Conservative government policies (see below) failed to noticeably improve race relations. Before coming to power Margaret Thatcher

promised 'finally to see an end to immigration' and spoke of those who feared they might be 'swamped by people with a different culture.' Subsequent racial tensions have been seen in the riots in 1979 and 1981 in London (Southall, Brixton), Bristol, and Liverpool (Toxteth), and in 1985 in many poor inner-city areas.

Various forms of harassment, verbal abuse, and physical attack, are still part of the experience of some members of ethnic groups in Britain today. More insidious, however, is the tacit acceptance by elements of society of racist beliefs, as reflected by the admission by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner in 1999 that racialism has become institutionalised in his police force.

A recurrent theme through these years has been the idea of preserving 'Britishness' in the face of a perceived outside cultural (and at times economic) threat. Thus to be truly British, immigrants should adapt to the British way of life. As has been the case in the past, however, definitions of Britishness were based on narrow and nostalgic stereotypes, (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant), and operated through exclusion. Former Conservative politician, Lord Tebbit, brought this back to the sporting field with his claim in the 1990s that members of ethnic groups living in Britain but supporting other countries (such as the West Indies or India), in preference to Britain, could not be considered truly 'British'.

Government Policies

Governments have responded to racial tensions in three main ways:

- a. Limits on Immigration: Commonwealth Immigrant Acts of 1962 and 1968, Immigration Act 1971, Nationality Act of 1981 and 1987
- b. Legislation to prevent discrimination: Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968, and 1976, and the subsequent establishment after each of a Race Relations Board, Community Relations Commission, and Commission for Racial Equality. Details of the current state of the law can be found from [Foreign and Commonwealth sources](#)
- c. Policies to promote integration - particularly educational, such as multicultural education in schools

Impact of post-war immigration on sport

While one or two black footballers had appeared in the football League earlier, like the sprinter Wharton who became the first black professional soccer player with Preston North End from 1886, it was not until the demographics of the Caribbean migration after the Second World War began to have its full impact on British society that these numbers became significant.

Some key dates

1948 British Board of Boxing Control removes ban on non-white boxers challenging for titles (but they still need a ten year residency period)

1948 Dick Turpin wins British Middleweight title

1950-1 Randolph Turpin (younger brother of Dick) wins British, European, and World Middleweight titles

1960's A few black players, like Albert Johanneson at Leeds and Clyde Best at West Ham, playing in the football league

1972 Clive Sullivan is the first black sportsman or woman to captain a national side when he leads the Great Britain Rugby League side to victory in the World Cup

1978 Viv Anderson becomes the first black footballer to represent England

1980 Roland Butcher is the first West Indian born cricketer to play for England

1988 David Lawrence first British born black player to play cricket for England

1990 A survey of 92 Football League clubs shows that 12% of players are black

1991 The Football (Offences) Act makes racist chanting at football matches an offence

1993 Paul Ince becomes first black captain of the English national side

Black sporting success - 'Black Magic?'

The statistics show that black athletes have dramatically overachieved in certain sports such as football (almost a quarter of professional players in the English Leagues), athletics (over half the British Team), and boxing (90% of world champions). This has led to claims that such sports relying on strength and power provide opportunities for black athletes to display "natural" sporting attributes. However this racist claim is not supported by the facts.

In the first place, it ignores the material circumstances which provide compelling reasons for overachievement in these sports. These circumstances include the availability of both role models and opportunities in such sports, and hence the motivation for young blacks to succeed. It must also be remembered that such sports offer substantial financial reward to a proportion of the population who often have limited social and economic opportunities. "The

majority of young blacks will structure their ambitions around the icons they see before them, all but deified by television culture" (Cashmore, p.112).

Secondly, the genetic heritage of most 'races' has become so diversified and complicated by patterns of breeding that the idea of pure races, and the passing on of genetic qualities, is open to much question. Indeed, there is much to support the view propounded by anthropologists that notions of race are cultural and environmental, not genetic or biological.

The fact of this overrepresentation, however, serves to perpetuate the myth on various levels. Media reporting using headlines like the one used for this paragraph ('Black magic') is one example. This will be examined in the sections below.

The Asian sporting experience

Asian immigration of the 1950's and 1960's has not been reflected in sporting representation at elite levels. Traditional explanations for this focused again on racial characteristics (physical size, lack of aggressiveness), or cultural tendencies (strong work and education ethics making it less easy for talented youngsters to persuade their parents that sport is a viable career option). Recent research has shown that Asians are well represented in football and cricket at a local, amateur league level. This does not yet explain their absence from the professional scene, although the cultural factors mentioned, attitudes of coaches, and a lack of role models in sports like soccer may be significant. Enthusiasm among young Asians for cricket and football is undoubted however. The experiences of an Indian journalist, Mihir Bose, who settled in Britain, reflect some of the barriers Asians face "We had fallen in love with English sport expecting to be welcomed to a sporting Camelot, only to find ourselves treated as sporting Calibans" (Bose, M. 1996, p.34).

Sport and ethnicity - positive elements

1. The argument that sport is a positive force and can promote harmony among the races and challenge racism is supported by the following points:
2. Sport provides a very visible and public forum for discussing racism and discrimination. The Anti-Apartheid movement in the 1970's tried to prevent rebel sporting teams from the U.K. visiting the apartheid regime in South Africa, and in doing so became the focal point for anti-racist sentiment within Britain too. This was at a time when a popular response to Powellism (see above) was very much needed. More recently, in 1993, the Professional Football Association launched its "Let's Kick Racism out of Football" campaign, which had the support of the Football Supporters Association and most league clubs. Indeed, this educational campaign reinforced to a large extent the message which most 'fanzines' have been adopting since the mid-1980's.
3. Sport provides opportunities for blacks in Britain. From the early examples of the sprinters Bailey and Wint to more

recent sports stars like Daley Thompson, Linford Christie, John Barnes, Dwight Yorke, and Andy Cole, sport provides a means of social and economic mobility. Further proof of this mobility and the acceptance of black sports personalities is the way some have been able to develop other careers in endorsements, as television presenters, or studio experts (Daley Thompson and Ian Wright are two notable examples of this).

4. Black British sporting success is a symbol of unity for the nation as a whole. Some of the most visible manifestations of this have been Paul Ince's appointment as English Football captain in 1993, Linford Christie's habit (and many others) of draping himself in a Union Jack after victories at major athletics championships, and the obvious and open patriotism of the boxer Frank Bruno.
5. Sport is a means for the black community to earn respect and acceptance in British society. The existence of sporting role models can contribute to the assertion of black identity.
6. Black and Asian identity can also be asserted as a response to discrimination when ethnic groups turn inwards to assert their cultural autonomy. There are numerous all-Black or all-Asian cricket and football teams, and even Black or Asian leagues (one Midlands football team is entirely made up of Asians with the surname Patel!).

Sport and ethnicity - negative elements

Sport can be viewed as focus for perpetuating ethnic differences and as a vehicle for wider racism. This viewpoint would stress how:

1. From their early appearance in the 1960s, black football players have been treated with abuse in the form of racist chants, individual barracking (most black players were in wide positions very close to the crowd), and actions such as the throwing of bananas at players. While less pronounced, examples of racist taunts exist from rugby and cricket too, as David Lawrence confirms in the behaviour of some Yorkshire supporters " They called me nigger, black bastard, sambo, monkey, gorilla: they threw bananas and I had to take these insults" (quoted in Marquese, p.143). The PFA campaign, "Let's Kick Racism out of Football" mentioned above, is a response to racially targeted chanting and although it is legally outlawed, it still persists in the English game.
2. For a long time the football authorities and the media refused to accept that there was a problem with racism in sport. Commentaries on football matches would ignore racist chants or abuse, and newspapers rarely reported such incidents. There seemed a widespread assumption that talking about it made the problem worse, and that if it was ignored, it would go away. This wall of silence allowed the problem to fester for over twenty years.
3. The success in athletics, football and boxing hides a larger problem. Such sports are cheap and accessible in an urban environment, and have been traditionally (particularly boxing

and football), avenues for working class advancement. Class, not race, is the key issue. What is significant here is why blacks are under-represented at the elite level of sports such as tennis, swimming, golf, and so on. The suspicion that race, as well as economic cost, is a factor is hard to dismiss.

4. Black success in sport has been at the price of racial stereotyping. Initial black sporting success was explained by the racist belief that genetic factors gave superior speed, agility, and strength. A corollary of this was then assumed, that these same sportsmen and women lacked stamina, courage, and intellectual abilities. This led to the practice known as 'stacking' or 'centrality' whereby coaches and managers pushed black players into wide peripheral positions on the sportsfield, where their 'natural' abilities would be best used, and denied them opportunities in central decision making roles. Studies from the United States and Britain for sports such as American Football, Rugby, and Association football have confirmed this practice.
5. Public pronouncements of coaches and managers have reproduced crude racial stereotypes. In an infamous television documentary in 1993, the then chairman of Crystal Palace, Ron Noades, remarked of his (predominantly black) football team that, " on the other hand, when you are getting into midwinter in England, you need a few of the maybe hard white men to carry the artistic black players through" (quoted in Bose, 1996, p. 84). Jim Smith, while manager of Queens Park Rangers, claimed that black players 'seem to use very little intelligence; they get by on sheer natural talent most of the time" (quoted in Cashmore, p. 45).
6. Media representations of black sports people also perpetuate these stereotypes through reporting which emphasises skills and 'natural' ability before qualities such as effort, intelligence, or courage. A notorious example of this was from a few years ago when the tabloid press picked up on a photograph of Linford Christie in tight fitting lycra shorts and ran a whole series of features on Christie's 'lunch box', a crude sexual reference to his anatomy, based on stereotypes of black physique.
7. Despite their huge representation as football players, few positions in management or coaching are made available to black professionals. John Barnes, the ex-Liverpool winger now managing Celtic, is an exception here, but so is his background, as he comes from an upper-middle class Jamaican family. Similar claims are made about black and Asian referees, with only one, Uriah Rennie currently on the Football League list, the sole Asian referee having been removed in October 1999 (he is claiming unfair dismissal and taking his case to the Commission for Racial Equality).
8. Black and Asian fans make up just 1% of crowds at the top Premiership games. This may be linked to economic factors however, as watching football has become an extremely expensive pastime in the last ten years, as noted in the [Sponsorship, the Media and Violence](#) section of our pages.
9. Sport offers false hopes for the majority of young blacks, as

only a small minority will achieve the visible success of a Linford Christie, Frank Bruno or Andy Cole.

10. It is impossible to stamp out racism in sport because it is so deep-rooted in British society. As even the patriotic Christie has said, "Racism, especially in Britain, has become institutionalised".

The future

As Andy Hansen notes in his [review of 'The British at Play'](#), the emergence in the last ten years in footballer of midfielders and defenders like Paul Ince and Sol Campbell, who "specialise in delivering steady, muscular and typically 'English' performances for club and country (...) have laid to rest the myth of the skilful but soft and erratic black player". At the same time anti racist initiatives, such as 'Kick Racism out of Football', and 'Show Racism the Red Card' are bringing together clubs, players, football associations, the Commission for Racial Equality, the police, and local authorities. Other initiatives proposed by the government's advisory Football Task Force include encouraging more Asian players into the game, more minority ethnic representations at senior administration level and more minority ethnic spectators at football matches.

It is to be hoped that these attempts to remove racism from the 'national' game will be mirrored in other sports. The experience of the last fifty years is well documented:

"For black Britons, sport has remained a double-edged sword in post-war society, offering both advancement and obstacle, acceptance and crude stereotype" (Polley p.158).

A continuing change in attitudes within Britain is required for this not to be repeated in the next fifty years.

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