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Genetics and Sport Performance: The Debate

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The President of Florida State University, Dr. Dale Lick
resigned last week after controversy surrounding his candidacy
for the presidency of Michigan State University. That
controversy stemmed from comments he had once made concerning
the Black Athlete, in which he said that Black athletes were
naturally superior to whites, as they were able to jump higher
than whites, citing the evidence of basketball performance to
demonstrate his point.

All of this reminded me of a similar debate that surfaced in the
early 1970s when Sports Illustrated editor, Martin Kane, argued
that Blacks were physically superior to Whites in several ways.
He claimed blacks had longer leg muscles, wider calf bones, and
greater arm circumference, a greater tendon to muscle ratio, and
an elongated body structure allowing them to function more
efficiently as heat dissipaters.

He also claimed a black genetic advantage, as the weak members
of the black population had been eliminated by the selectivity
of American slavery. On the psychological side Kane reported
that blacks had a greater capacity for relaxation under pressure
than whites.

The problems with the thoughts of Mr. Kane and those of Dr. Lick
are many, and left both of them open to the charges of racism.
The most obvious weakness of any argument of this nature is that
it attributes a racial characteristic to a large group, on the
basis of a very small sample. In Kane's case he was talking
about professional athletes, and in Lick's case he was talking
about his own limited anecdotal observation of basketball
players.

But there are numerous other difficulties. First, and most
significant, is that no one has ever been able to develop
criteria for a definition of the concept of race. Indeed many
anthropologists and physiologists doubt that such a thing as
race exists at all.

Beyond this it has been repeatedly demonstrated that individual
black athletes differ among themselves in terms of body types
and physical characteristics as much as they differ from any
selected individual whites. Furthermore many black athletes can
be shown to be more like a selected group of white athletes than
a selected group of black athletes.
Even within a group of black athletes, as within the black population as a whole, there is tremendous diversity of physical builds, body proportions, and other anatomical, physiological, and biological features. The same can be said of whites. In the face of this diversity, generalizations fail.

To look at a specific example: If 50% of all blacks in America have a favorable leg length to height ratio, compared to 20% of whites, then you might expect that there would still be three times more actual numbers of whites than blacks in the total population with this trait. Therefore three times more white athletes than black athletes would possess this physiological advantage. Beyond that it is very difficult to connect a particular physical trait to a particular athletic skill or performance.

In the psychological area of relaxation under stress, there is virtually no evidence to support the claim of black superiority, and in fact some studies show the opposite.

As to the claim that there is some sort of genetic superiority resulting from the selective character of survival in slavery, this is beyond all belief, and fits well into the Jimmy the Greek school of genetics.

This argument is significant because if natural athletic skills belong to blacks then they can not claim to have earned and learned these skills. They can not use the facts of their performance as evidence for either equality or their suitability to serve as coaches. This is also related to the rationale for denying blacks certain positions that are designated as requiring high mental abilities. The quarterback in football would be one such example.

If there is no evidence of physical superiority then how can the high numbers of blacks excelling in professional sport be explained. Clearly cultural factors come into play, such as motivation, perception of opportunities for success, and limited avenues for success. The black athlete is hungrier than his white counterpart.

Earlier in this century Jews dominated basketball and boxing, and at various times other groups have dominated in other sports. At no time did any of these groups do so for reasons of natural superiority, and to suggest otherwise would be absurd.
Just as it is absurd to suggest that black athletes are naturally superior today.

Some white men can jump, some black men can not jump.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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