

Furthering integration or perpetuating a stereotype?

Integration through sport is nothing more than symbolism, and does little to further the social and economic situation of blacks, says US author John Hoberman. Europe can learn much from the lessons of sport and race

»The popular claim that sport has a positive effect on racial integration is overstated. It is a trap. Even though some blacks achieve excellence in sport, it does not give them any more jobs or a better education.«

Author of the book *Darwin's Athletes*, Professor John Hoberman of the University of Texas offers some thought-provoking views on sport and race. Although the USA has had a head start on many European nations in the field of racial integration, he says, some areas of Europe are generally finding fewer problems in the assimilation of minorities than the USA experienced when integration first began. Although major obstacles exist, he suggests that some European nations benefit from long-standing traditions of equality, more pronounced anti nazi views, and sports associations that are not just concerned about creating stars and making money.

However, he warns that there are plenty of parallels between race relations in Europe and the USA. For example, the stereotype image of blacks being physically superior in sports, but unable to achieve social status elsewhere, is also found in Europe.

»It is wishful thinking to say that there is not a problem in Europe,« he says. »There is a global myth that those



of African origin are physically superior in some way. This cements myths about racial differences, and does little to improve their status.«

The politics of desperation

Hoberman points out that elite sport has never been a positive means of integration for blacks in the USA or in Europe. Even though football is widely

seen as "breaking down racial barriers," Hoberman reminds us that it is still common for white football fans to abuse black players.

»Politicians are desperately searching for answers to the problems of integration - and in Europe, what could be more popular than football?« he asks. »Everyone who watches football on TV is given the illusion that successful black athletes are creating social mobility for their entire race. A black sports star's smiling face hides an entire system of race-related injustices. The illusion also serves to camouflage the catastrophic health problems that exist among African-Americans and others of African origin.«

»It is false integration,« he says. »The fact that multinational football is screened on TV each day does not improve the social and economic situation of blacks.« He adds that it is not surprising that the myth of blacks as "superior" sportsmen lives on, when the predominantly white trainers and managers are constantly buying young African talent to be tested, trained, and most often discarded by Europe's professional soccer teams.

Social status is equitable integration.

Hoberman goes on to state that the familiar images of black athletes in the United States do not serve the social advancement of African Americans. In recent years, black athletes have been involved in a highly publicised series of criminal cases that, he says, have only served to perpetuate stereotypes. »All of these social phenomena demonstrate that it is time to relieve black people of the athletic identity our colonial legacy has inflicted upon them,« he says.

At the same time, Professor Hoberman is more optimistic about the integration of children through sport. However, he points out that successful integration cannot be achieved through sport alone. It must include opportunities to achieve social status and advancement off the playing field. ♦

