



GERALD L. EARLY

# A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

AFRICAN AMERICAN ATHLETES AND THE REPUBLIC OF SPORTS



# A Level Playing Field



Gerald L. Early

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# A Level Playing Field

*Based on the Alain Locke Lectures*

## Acknowledgments

The chapters that make up Part I of this volume were presented as the Alain Locke Lectures in 2004 at the Du Bois Institute at Harvard University, and I am thankful to Henry Louis Gates and Lawrence Bobo for giving me the opportunity to have such a forum to present some ideas I had about African Americans and sports. Two of the three lectures have been revised for publication: the arguments strengthened and clarified as a service to myself and also to my readers. The chapters, taken together, roughly cover African Americans and sports in the post-World War II era, from Jackie Robinson, Paul Robeson, and the HUAC-House Un-American Activities Committee (the late 1940s and early 1950s) to Curt Flood and his challenge of major league baseball's reserve clause (the late 1960s and early 1970s) to the Donovan McNabb and Rush Limbaugh controversy (the twenty-first century). The chapters

have certain thematic linkages that give them unity, more apparent now than when they were delivered as lectures. I would like to thank Lindsay Waters for believing in this project sufficiently to publish these lectures. I am also grateful to the National Humanities Center, where I was the John Hope Franklin Fellow in 2001–2002. It was there that the first draft of the Jackie Robinson essay was written. I am grateful to readers who read this work in the manuscript stage and offered good suggestions for improving it and to my friend, accomplished sports historian Michael McCambridge, for reading and offering incisive criticism of two of the lectures. These readers should share in the credit of whatever is good here; what remains bad is a reflection of my inadequacy and no one else's.

The three chapters in Part II—"American Integration, Black Heroism, and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson," originally published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on May 23, 1997; "Performance and Reality: Race, Sports, and the Modern World," from *The Nation*, August 10, 1998; and "Where Have We Gone, Mr. Robinson?" from *Time*, April 12, 2007—constitute my most sustained sports commentary during these years (1992–2008), aside from my service as an on-air analyst for Ken Burns's *Baseball*

(1994) and *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (2005) and for several ESPN and HBO sports documentaries, including features on Bob Gibson, Muhammad Ali, Sonny Liston, and the history of the black athlete. What I liked most about writing the chapters that constitute the second part of this book is that I was permitted to return to the popular essay, which I liked very much, as it was the form of writing that gave me my fame, such as it may be. In short, I was a writer about sports (not a sportswriter) rather than a scholar about sports, and here I felt much more keenly the effect of having read Hemingway, Liebling, Mailer, Bill James, C. L. R. James, and Carlo Rotello, a certain literary aspiration in writing about sports. It is perhaps this distinction that I wish to make between approach and sensibility in delineating the two sections of this book. In the first part, in the lectures, I wanted very much to make a scholar's argument and, in revising the lectures for publication, felt I had as much space as I wished, which allowed me to include lengthy annotations to create a rather grand effect; in the second part of the book I am the writer and thinker, the commentator, if you will, operating within the clear constraints of the magazine piece, limited word counts, and no access to any

form of annotation. This distinction is important for the reader in order to understand what each part of the book is trying to achieve and how it is trying to achieve it.

Over the years, I have reviewed many sports books. I enjoy reading sports books, even books about sports that I do not like. Boxing books remain my absolute favorites, followed by baseball books. I could have written more sports essays if I had had the time to do so. The lack of production was not a reflection of my lack of interest. I wrote a few pieces about boxing during this span, but I wrote more about baseball because my appearance in Burns's popular documentary on the sport rather sealed my connection to it. I chose not to include any of my boxing pieces here to give this book a certain sense of unity—all of the chapters are about players engaged in team sports. My sole regret is that I have not written more about professional (American) football, a sport I have always loved and, in recent years through my friendship with sports historian Michael McCambridge, have learned to appreciate even more. The two pieces on Robinson in Part II complement and overlap very nicely with the Robinson chapter that opens this book. It is interesting that I was commissioned to write essays on



Robinson commemorating both the fiftieth and sixtieth anniversaries of his start with the Brooklyn Dodgers—the Burns effect, no doubt, but I am actually rather proud of that; I assume, however, that once the seventieth anniversary rolls around, editors will seek younger and fresher perspectives. I do not think I have anything more to say about Robinson, and it is odd for me to think that when I was in my twenties I swore that I would never write about Robinson at all. I might add that the last Robinson piece (Chapter 6) generated some mild controversy because I said blacks choose not to play baseball, which some people found extraordinary and wanted to recite to me all sorts of “structural” stuff about high Little League fees, lack of green space in black urban communities, and the uninviting atmosphere of mostly white college baseball teams and the like as reasons blacks are excluded from playing baseball. I never found any of these reasons, on close examination, to be especially persuasive, but I was taken by the fact that there seems to be a persistency in this world, both political and intellectual, never to give black people agency except as a sign of rebellion. Otherwise, all of our choices are made by racism. That belief, however well intentioned as a form of analysis, sometimes gives me the willies.

Black people were never that crazy about baseball when it was, back in the 1920s and 1930s, the only professional game in town! *The Nation* essay, which appears as Chapter 5 in this book, complements and overlaps in very useful ways with the Introduction and with aspects of the chapters that make up Part I. I thought that that essay was a rather strangely lyrical, even somewhat elegiac, piece for *The Nation*, but once again I am proud that I was asked to write it. I find it amusing to think that nearly all of the sports pieces I have written during this period were commissioned. I wonder if I would have chosen these subjects myself if I were free to write about anything that interested me about sports. In retrospect, I rather have the feeling of a jazz musician playing, to borrow a phrase, everyone's song but my own.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife and my two daughters who, over the years, have watched on television or attended many sporting events with me, particularly baseball games, even though they do not particularly like sports. They have allowed me to explain sports to them at great length, have supported my passion for particular athletes and teams, have celebrated when my favorites won, and have commiserated with me when they lost.

They have heard all of the arguments in this book rehearsed dozens of times. I am humbled by the fact that they did this because they wanted to share in something that gave me so much pleasure, that made me happy, and that what made me happy made them happy too. In this way they taught me much more than I ever taught them. To paraphrase C. L. R. James, *what do they know of sports who only sports know?*

## **A Level Playing Field**

## Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
-----------------	-----

Introduction	1
--------------	---

### PART I Leveling the Playing Field

1. When Worlds Collide: Jackie Robinson,  
Paul Robeson, Harry Truman,  
and the Korean War 23
2. Curt Flood, Gratitude,  
and the Image of Baseball 70
3. Donovan McNabb, Rush Limbaugh, and  
the Making of the Black Quarterback 110

PART II Heroism and the Republic of Sports

4. American Integration, Black Heroism,  
and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson 169
  5. Performance and Reality: Race, Sports,  
and the Modern World 185
  6. Where Have We Gone, Mr. Robinson? 225
- Notes 233

## Introduction

*Who'll be my role model  
now that my role model is gone?*  
—Paul Simon, “You Can Call Me Al”

“NO ATHLETE IS ONLY AN ATHLETE,” writes Debra Shogan in her book *The Making of High-Performance Athletes: Discipline, Diversity, and Ethics* (1999), and this is almost self-evidently true. “Despite the detail of sport discipline, athlete identity is not consumed by it. Athletes, like other people, participate in a number of overlapping conflicting disciplines that together produce a distinctive hybrid identity for each person.”<sup>1</sup> All high-performance athletes are products of the social and cultural systems that created them, of the systems and ways of life that value their activities and their achievements; further, they are emblems, exemplars, and representations of those systems in ways that

virtually no one else is or no one else can be. The “hybridity” of star athletes—their construction as athletes and the intersection of that construction with the other constructions that define them in a number of complex, even conflicted, ways—makes them compelling social figures, both transcendent and constrained. This book is divided into two parts. The first section is comprised of three case studies and, in the second part, commentaries on the significance of the high-performance, hybrid athlete in post-World War II America are offered. Part I, based on a set of lectures, and Part II, composed of previously published non-academic essays, were conceived, taken together, to be an entity, an interlocking statement, a sustained examination of race, high performance athletics, and history.

High-performance athletes are social constructions, as we all are, but they are peculiar in their construction, singular. High-performance athletes are not merely social roles or a collection of habits and customs; they are mythologies. On a certain level, athletes are a special sort of socially constructed mirror that reflects a romanticized version of cultural honor and cultural virtue. Athletes can be heroic and celebrated for their heroism in their performance in the way no artist or worker in another



line of work can, for the athlete can symbolize the honor of a group or nation in dramatic, even melodramatic, terms. High-performance athletics is perhaps the most theatrical and emotional form of ritualized honor that we have left in the world. Of course artists and other nonathletic types have become national and group heroes,<sup>2</sup> but a great high-performance athlete can more easily be elevated to this role because he or she is usually young, and youth has an intensely charismatic appeal to most people; he or she has obtained a standard of excellence that is self-evident and objectively measurable and has had to achieve greatness by performing under enormous public and competitive pressure.

I examine African American athletes in this book because they offer an instructive and a complex view, a compelling ironical perspective of athletic honor as they represent, in part, a group that was historically considered socially without honor: they are, arguably, the most imposing hybrid figures in American sports. A certain ambiguity clouds the reputation of African American athletes even today; they cannot seem to shake their social degradation. What else could explain a book such as William Rhoden's *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, which