
The Olympic Games and the Inclusion of Black American Athletes in the Early 20th Century

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Résumé

It is commonly believed that the Olympic Games were, especially in their early days, primarily an endeavor that allowed a European elite to promote its vision of sport, even if it meant excluding certain groups of athletes. This paper aims to show that the example of Black American athletes complicates the image of this competition and the ways in which it produces exclusion or inclusion.

At the time the modern Olympic Games were born, Black American athletes faced segregation. This, of course, affected sports. In this context, they found in the Olympic Games one of the very few sporting arenas that were not closed to them. The barrier here was not primarily racial but social: these Black athletes were students at universities in the East or the Midwest, the primary recruitment grounds for the first American participants in the Games.

Consequently, the Olympic Games emerged as an opportunity to compete on equal footing with white athletes, to demonstrate their excellence, and even to contribute to the construction of a racially mixed national identity. This is a case where the international arena serves as a recourse for an oppressed minority for whom the situation at the national level appears to be at an impasse. However, we must question the limits of this inclusion: Black athletes could participate in the Games, but forms of segregation persisted within their delegation. This presentation, at the intersection of sports history and transnational history, presents some of the findings from my PhD dissertation. This research relies primarily on press sources, particularly the Black press-newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier* -as well as on a dozen athlete autobiographies that help reconstruct the experience of these first Black Olympic participants.

Mots-Clés: Olympics, race, Black Americans, racial minorities

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