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BEFORE JACKIE ROBINSON

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Before Jackie Robinson

The Transcendent Role of
Black Sporting Pioneers

Edited and with an introduction by

GERALD R. GEMS

University of Nebraska Press

LINCOLN & LONDON

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CONTENTS

Introduction . . 1

GERALD R. GEMS

1. Like a Comet across the Heavens:
Isaac Burns Murphy, Horseracing, and the
Age of American Exceptionalism . . 17

PELLOM MCDANIELS III

2. John M. Shippen Jr.: Testing the Front Nine
of American Golf . . 41

SARAH JANE EIKLEBERRY

3. When Great Wasn't Good Enough: Sam Ransom's
Journey from Athlete to Activist . . 67

GERALD R. GEMS

4. A League of Their Own: Rube Foster's
"Pitfalls of Baseball" Revisited . . 89

MICHAEL E. LOMAX

5. Bessie Coleman: "The Only Race
Aviatrix in the World" . . 113

BIEKE GILS

6. Sol Butler: The Fleeting Fame of a
World-Class Black Athlete . . 139
JAMES E. ODENKIRK
7. Robert L. “Bob” Douglas: “Aristocracy on the Court,
an Architect of Men” . . 155
SUSAN J. RAYL
8. Isadore Channels: The Recovered Life of a Great
African American Sports Star . . 179
ROBERT PRUTER
9. Tommy Brookins: Pioneer in Two Worlds . . 205
MURRY NELSON
10. Tidye Pickett: The Unfulfilled Aspirations of America’s
Pioneering African American Female Track Star . . 237
ROBERT PRUTER
11. Harold “Killer” Johnson: Making a Career
in the Popular Culture . . 263
JAMES COATES
12. Continuing the Struggle: Teddy Rhodes
and Professional Golf . . 279
RAYMOND SCHMIDT
- Contributors . . 305
Index . . 309

BEFORE JACKIE ROBINSON

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Introduction

GERALD R. GEMS

Before *Jackie Robinson* is a cooperative effort to recover a significant part of the past. It attempts to fill a significant hole in the literature of our American history. Why does that matter? Our personal histories make us who we are as individuals, and our collective histories provide us with a national identity as Americans. One of the characteristics of American culture that differentiates it from so many others in the world is the influence of race in American history. The genre of “new biography” that has emerged in the twenty-first century places greater emphasis on “the socially contested nature of identity constructions, so that it treats biography as acts of identity politics in the social struggles of a time,” a method that allows “social groups to reach an understanding about who they are and who they want to be.”¹ This volume makes a distinct attempt to incorporate the factors of race and race politics over a transitional period in American history that eventually transformed the nature of American society and American history.

The choice of subjects provides a sense of chronological change and the incremental transition in race relations in American culture over approximately a half century. Sports provided a very visible means of that process. While many Americans might be familiar with Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens, all of whom operated on an international stage, we chose to examine the lives of no

less important athletic pioneers, once well known but increasingly forgotten, who pushed the social boundaries on other levels in their quest to dismantle racism.

Slavery commenced with some of the earliest colonial settlers in 1619 and held a central role in the American economy and society for the next 250 years. The Civil War, which pitted Americans and even families against one another, is attributed to the enslavement of African Americans. It cost more than six hundred thousand American lives, the greatest disaster in the history of the nation.

With the end of the Civil War and the reorganization of the defeated Confederate states, a period known as Reconstruction, the undertaking offered hope and promise to the newly liberated slaves. That optimistic expectation proved illusory and temporary. When the presidential election of 1876 resulted in a stalemate, the two political parties reached an agreement that gave the presidency to the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, but allowed the Democrats to resume their previous control of the southern states. Restrictive suffrage qualifications, complete disenfranchisement, Jim Crow segregation laws, and the sharecropping system quickly returned blacks to a state of peonage, reinforced by widespread lynchings, the ramifications of which still beset the American society today.

A former slave, Booker T. Washington, founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881; it taught vocational skills and provided black teachers for the segregated schools. Rather than social equality Washington preached the acquisition of skills for the workplace. His accommodationist and non-threatening philosophy won him support from white leaders and recognition as the top black spokesperson of the late nineteenth century. Under such guidance athletes found some limited opportunity in the dominant white culture—but not equality. Blacks faced continual denigration and stereotyping and were often depicted as cartoonish minstrels or Sambo figures in the white media, incapable of full inclusion in the white mainstream society.

Jockeys such as Isaac Murphy, Willie Sims, and Jimmy Winkfield won numerous Kentucky Derby races from 1884 to 1902 and earned considerable sums for their skills, but they were only the employees of wealthy owners who garnered the larger prizes and national acclaim.

The black jockeys also suffered the resentment of their white competitors. The jockeys, however, fared better than other athletes. Moses Fleetwood Walker reached the zenith of professional baseball as a catcher for the Toledo team in the American Association in 1884, but white opponents refused to participate in games against him, causing the management to release him and relegating him to the minor leagues thereafter. The white crusade to oust black players from the top echelons of professional baseball continued relentlessly for the remainder of the century. In the South, blacks were completely segregated from interracial competitions in team sports by custom and by law. Any who violated the southern social norms risked beatings, incarceration, and lynching. In the northern states some black football players won recognition for their abilities as individuals who contributed to team success, but they regularly faced the ire of white opponents who sought to injure them. Still William Henry Lewis won All-American honors at Harvard in 1892 and 1893 and eventually rose to the position of assistant U.S. attorney general in Boston, where a local barber had refused to cut his hair.² Such black achievements and successes were virtually excluded from presentation at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, dubbed the "White City" by the media.³

Lewis's ascendance represented a black invasion of the white power structure, but his talents overcame prejudice. Other northern blacks began to test white assumptions of superiority in other forms of sport. Like in horse racing, blacks were expected to serve wealthier golfers as caddies in an employer-employee relationship. When John Shippen, who had learned to play golf as a caddie for whites, entered the sacrosanct U.S. Open in 1896, the other entrants arranged a boycott. Only the courageous efforts of U. S. Golf Association (USGA) president Theodore Havemeyer, who supported Shippen, saved the tournament. Shippen represented a challenge to the white concept of the self-made man, presumably reserved for white males. A loss to a non-white could damage the perception of white racial superiority, a basic tenet of the racist society that upheld white privilege. Shippen continued to challenge white hegemony, entering the tournament repeatedly in 1899, 1900, 1902, and 1913. The USGA would eventually adopt a whites-only policy. Such exclusionary tactics resulted in black golf-

ers forming their own parallel organization, and Shippen became a golf instructor, eventually employed at Shady Rest Golf and Country Club, a black enterprise established in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, in 1921. He had made a formidable statement in the quest for equality but had little to show for it, dying in poverty and largely forgotten at the age of eighty-nine in 1968.⁴

Cyclist Major Taylor personified another such provocation as his abilities clearly surpassed that of his white opponents as he set numerous world records in head to head competition and won the world championship by 1899. His success fostered the animosity of white cyclists and their collusion to hinder his efforts forced him to seek his fortune abroad, where he earned as much as \$10,000 annually. Such physical prowess offered one means of social mobility when other avenues were denied.⁵

Such head-to-head individual competitions challenged the dominant Social Darwinian beliefs in white superiority. Boxers had already confronted that awareness by the late nineteenth century. White perceptions of blacks as physically inferior, weak-willed, cowardly, lacking in toughness and personal discipline, and unable to withstand a stomach punch enabled black fighters to enter the professional ring. White audiences expected to see and enjoyed watching black boxers being pummeled by white opponents. White men organized “battle royals” in which black youth were thrown in a ring, sometimes blindfolded, to fight until the last one standing was awarded with cheers or coins. At the professional level John L. Sullivan, who held the heavyweight championship from 1882 to 1892, instituted a ban on black challengers to ensure that the symbolic title of physical supremacy remained in white hands.

In 1891 Peter Jackson, the top black heavyweight of the era, fought Jim Corbett to a draw after sixty rounds, negating the belief in blacks’ limited endurance. The next year Corbett defeated John L. Sullivan to gain the championship, but he never gave Jackson a rematch. On the same program in which Corbett defeated Sullivan, known as the Carnival of Champions, George Dixon thoroughly thrashed Jack Skelly, a white fighter, to claim the featherweight championship. A day after the mauling an editorial appeared in the *New Orleans*

Times-Democrat that objected to the interracial bout: “We of the South who know the fallacy and danger of this doctrine of race equality, who are opposed to placing the negro [*sic*] on any terms of equality, who have insisted on a separation of the races in church, hotel, car, saloon and theatre; who believe that the law ought to step in and forever forbid the idea of equality by making marriages between them illegal, are heartily opposed to any arrangement encouraging this equality, which gives negroes false ideas and dangerous beliefs.”⁶ The color line was enforced in the South thereafter and given legal sanction in the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the unsuccessful suit of a New Orleans mulatto who had refused to take a segregated seat in a railway car.

Black boxers might compete at the lower weight classes because the heavyweight title symbolized the top tier of physical superiority, and in 1902 Joe Gans became the first black fighter acknowledged as a world champion when he captured the lightweight crown. In 1906 he added the welterweight title, and his forty-two-round war with Oscar “Battling” Nelson was considered to be the “fight of the century” and elicited the highest purse for a boxing match up to that date. A black newspaper claimed that Gans enjoyed more celebrity than Booker T. Washington, yet Gans suffered bankruptcy and an early death. His success proved to be ephemeral.⁷

By that time W. E. B. Du Bois, a Harvard PhD, had assumed a more militant stance in opposition to Booker T. Washington’s accommodationism. Du Bois declared that blacks need not acquiesce because a “talented tenth” of their number could compete equally with whites on a level playing field. In Chicago a young multisport star, Sam Ransom, proved that assertion in the high school ranks. He was accorded unbiased recognition by the more liberal Chicago media but did not receive a remuneration in the form of college scholarships offered to his white teammates. In 1903 Dubois asserted that “submission to civic inferiority . . . is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.”⁸ Ransom would assume a more deliberate engagement in American citizenship and fight for greater rights and recognition of blacks throughout the remainder of his life.

Shortly after Ransom’s athletic triumphs, Jack Johnson, king of the

black heavyweights, destroyed the myth of white supremacy. When champion Jim Jeffries retired from the ring undefeated, Tommy Burns emerged as the new titleholder, and he embarked on a global tour to maximize the profit of his title. Jack Johnson followed him to Australia, where Burns was coerced to fight Johnson for a magnificent sum. It proved to be a gross mismatch as Johnson toyed with Burns before ending his short reign. As the world champion, Johnson refused to give other top black boxers a shot at his title, so Joe Jeannette, Sam Langford, Sam McVea, and others traveled to Europe to gain fame and fortune, as did many black musicians and the celebrated dancer Josephine Baker in later years.

Johnson proceeded to outrage whites by his flamboyant lifestyle, liaisons and eventual marriages to white women, and the fact that a series of “white hopes” could not dislodge him from his position atop the heavyweight ranks. On July 4, 1910, the previously undefeated Jeffries even came out of retirement to restore the laurels to the white race, but he too tasted an ignominious defeat at the hands of Johnson. Johnson’s victory fostered race riots throughout America, a measure of whites’ vitriolic backlash at their comeuppance. Films of the fight were banned, and the U.S. government got further involved by charging Johnson with a violation of the Mann Act, involving the transportation of women across state lines for illegal purposes, and Johnson became a fugitive. Despite Johnson’s dominance of the heavyweight ranks, or perhaps because of it, D. W. Griffith’s popular 1915 movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, continued to portray black men as primitive, oversexed, and immoral savages, less than worthy of full citizenship. Johnson lost the title to Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba, in 1915 (Johnson claimed that he threw the fight), and upon his return to the United States in 1920 he served a year in prison and was never permitted to fight for the championship again.⁹

While the federal government persecuted and prosecuted Johnson, the United States portrayed itself more liberally and democratically in the pluralistic representation of the 1912 Olympic team, which featured the black sprinter Howard Drew, the Hawaiian swimmer Duke Kahanamoku, and Native American Jim Thorpe. Drew became known as “the world’s fastest human.” Kahanamoku garnered six

medals as an Olympian from 1912 to 1932, and Thorpe was dubbed the greatest athlete in the world after winning both the pentathlon and the decathlon, but neither blacks, Hawaiians, nor Native Americans were accorded the full rights of citizenship.¹⁰

After the turn of the century more southern blacks, like Jack Johnson, who was born in Galveston, Texas, migrated northward for opportunities unavailable in the South and in search of a better life. Between 1915 and 1970 an estimated six million southern blacks sought refuge outside that region. Many traveled to northern cities, where they vied with millions of mostly European immigrants for more plentiful and better-paying jobs. The multitudes of European groups often segregated themselves in urban neighborhoods with countrymen whose language and culture they understood, a choice that allowed for a more gradual assimilation into American culture. Southern black migrants had less choice in their accommodations, as white realtors and property owners conspired to prevent black home ownership in their areas, resulting in the ghettoization of blacks within major cities. Within such neglected communities blacks were forced to largely develop their own resources and institutions. Employers and religious groups, such as the YMCA, even built separate sport and recreational facilities to maintain such exclusion lest blacks and poor whites fraternize in their leisure pursuits and possibly unite in labor unions to oppose their bosses.¹¹

Sol Butler, the son of a former slave, emerged as a track star during the World War I years, but the carnage derailed the Olympic Games in 1916. Butler set a new American record in the long jump as a soldier at the Inter-Allied Games, a military Olympics held in Paris in the wake of the war. In the 1920 Games he was injured and unable to capitalize on his athletic fame. Thereafter he managed to make a living as a football and basketball star, a sportswriter, and in movie roles. He parlayed his athletic abilities into coaching positions in Chicago within the black community, helping black youth to develop their athletic talents as his life became more closely intertwined with the popular culture. As is true for many black men today, violence permeated urban neighborhoods and dreams went unfulfilled, and Butler eventually lost his life in a bar shootout.¹²

Violence against blacks continued after the war in the form of race riots and lynchings as returning white and black veterans and hosts of ethnic immigrants competed for jobs. Chicago suffered a major race riot in 1919, ignited when black youth wandered across the dividing line that segregated their separate sections of a public beach. The resultant bloodshed lasted for a week, cost thirty-eight lives and more than five hundred injuries, left more than one thousand homeless, and required the intervention of the National Guard to quell the violence. Rube Foster, another Texas transplant, had moved to Chicago as a pro baseball player—and even partnered with a white co-owner of a team—before acquiring his own baseball club. Foster’s early success as an entrepreneur signaled the possibilities of life in the more liberal northern cities, but the continued influx of southern blacks threatened the job security of working-class whites. In the wake of the race riot Foster decided to initiate the Negro National League, as black players were still barred from the white Major League teams. The venture proved so successful that a second pro circuit, the Eastern Colored League, appeared in 1923. Foster provided talented black athletes with a stage to display their skills in a “public ritual of performance” that allowed them to establish their newfound sense of masculinity.¹³ Other black entrepreneurs found in baseball another means to engage in the popular culture. Some of them merged their baseball enterprises with the numbers racket, a form of the poor man’s lottery in black neighborhoods, where residents constructed an alternative economy to meet their needs.

When Bessie Coleman could not meet her psychological, emotional, and occupational needs, she left the country voluntarily because American flight instructors refused to teach her to fly a plane. She found such tutelage in France and returned as the first black female pilot, extending the perceived limits of feminine possibilities. Coleman pushed both racial and gender boundaries, attempting daring feats in barnstorming air shows and exhibitions until such deeds took her life in 1926. Coleman’s escape to Paris in response to the impediments she faced in the United States was not atypical. The French capital had served as a refuge for African Americans since the late nineteenth century.

Henry O. Tanner, a black art student, left the United States in 1891 to study in Rome but became so enchanted with the City of Lights that he stayed in Paris. "At no time was he made to feel unwanted or inferior because of his color, which had not always been so in Philadelphia," where he had studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.¹⁴ Peter Jackson, the heavyweight boxer, soon followed Tanner to Paris, and a bevy of black fighters popularized boxing in France after the turn of the century. An American writer claimed, "They earn more in a week there than they used to in many months over here."¹⁵ Jack Johnson, as a fugitive from American prosecutors, also resided in Paris, where he mixed boxing with theatrical performances and became a local celebrity until World War I interrupted his interlude. The French had seemingly obtained a fascination with the black body that paved the way for a multitude of African American jazz age entertainers during the 1920s.¹⁶

The 1920s are considered the first Golden Age of sport in the United States, as the new technology of the radio, motion pictures, and extensive media coverage of athletic stars brought celebrity, fame, and heroization to champions. The era also produced a black renaissance in sports, literature, art, and music, centered in New York's Harlem and Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhoods, where athletes often carried the banner of racial dignity. Such developments promoted black pride and drew attention to African American culture, accomplishments, and abilities, but these did not gain full acceptance in the dominant white mainstream culture. In New York Marcus Garvey preached black nationalism and black enterprise and team owners subscribed to the latter. As it had with Jack Johnson, the federal government perceived Garvey as a threat. He was incarcerated in 1925 and deported to his native Jamaica two years later.

After Johnson's loss of the championship white successors instituted a color ban on black heavyweights. Harry Wills remained a top contender during Jack Dempsey's reign as champion but never got a shot at the crown despite compiling a record of 68-9-3 with fifty-four knockouts and living an abstemious lifestyle. Wills had also defeated Willie Meehan, a boxer who had only lost once to Dempsey in four fights.¹⁷ At the lower weights Tiger Flowers became the first black to

capture the middleweight title in 1926. Flowers lived in a large house in Atlanta, ostentatiously but spotlessly as a church deacon and a philanthropist. He proved acceptable to whites as one “who knew his place” and did not assert the recalcitrant attitude of northern blacks. Flowers’s career, however, proved short-lived as he died the following year as a result of surgery around his eyes to remove scar tissue caused by boxing.¹⁸ The same could not be said of Francisco Guilledo, a Filipino who assumed the ring name of Pancho Villa, the revolutionary Mexican bandit who had terrorized the American Southwest during World War I. Villa had learned to box from the American soldiers who still occupied his island country since the Spanish-American War of 1898. After defeating the best of the Americans in Manila, he traveled to the United States, where he won the world flyweight championship and antagonized whites as a smaller version of Jack Johnson. He dressed lavishly, spent his money extravagantly, and cavorted with a bevy of white women, followed by his large entourage. Like other people of color, he was racialized by sportswriters, who rationalized his speed and consequent wins over white opponents as the works of an inhuman demon. He, too, died after a short reign of two years due to blood poisoning after surgery for infected teeth in 1925. His wife claimed his death amounted to a murder, and Filipinos considered it a national tragedy. When his body was returned to the Philippines for burial, one hundred thousand mourners attended his funeral.¹⁹

Both Jack Johnson and Pancho Villa had become enamored of the vibrant nightlife then permeating urban centers as musicians from the South brought ragtime music and then jazz and the blues to northern climes in their migrations. Chicago became a center for the music and recording industry, and Jack Johnson opened an early black and tan cabaret there where upper-class whites drawn to the new genre went “slumming” with black entertainers and dancers to experience a sensuality absent in their own lives. The musical attractions provided other venues for entrepreneurs as black youth and Filipinos flocked to nightclubs and dance halls in search of excitement deemed immoral by white puritans.²⁰

Black athletes also had close ties with the music industry as musi-

cians, singers, talent scouts, and booking agents. Paul Robeson, Fritz Pollard, and Jay Mayo “Ink” Williams gained their initial fame on the football field because civic rivalries that spawned incessant gambling required the best athletes and profit and pride superseded race. Within that competitive environment Pollard became the first black quarterback and the first black head coach in the nascent NFL due to his athletic skills, and he recruited other blacks for his ventures. Robeson joined Pollard on the gridiron but would gain greater stature as a singer, actor, and civil rights activist before being chased out of the United States due to his political convictions. Pollard too turned to the music industry and other ventures, as all blacks were weeded out of the NFL after the 1933 season through the efforts of George Marshall, owner of the Washington franchise. But Pollard’s son would contribute to the Americans’ rejection of Aryan supremacy at the Nazi Olympics of 1936 when he became a bronze medalist in the 110-meter hurdles race.²¹

Basketball provided more opportunities for athletes to make a living during the 1920s as a burgeoning professional circuit and interracial challenge matches offered income during the winter months. Not only black southerners but also more than 140,000 Caribbean migrants traveled to the United States between 1899 and 1937. Bob Douglas, born in St. Kitts (one of the British Virgin Islands), traveled to New York, where he organized a fully professional unit in 1923 known as the Renaissance Five, a reference to the Renaissance Ballroom, from which they emanated. Sport merged with other elements of the popular culture as intermissions at the popular dance halls featured basketball games, and the Renaissance moniker served to market the dance hall as well as the basketball team. The Rens not only prospered, but they also beat the white professional teams and won the first national pro tournament in 1939. Like the boxing victories of Joe Louis, such successes instilled and maintained black pride and a sense of self-worth.²²

A similar undertaking occurred in Chicago, where the Savoy Five played at the Savoy Ballroom but soon began barnstorming as the Harlem Globetrotters. They assumed the reference to the New York neighborhood as a tribute to its national influence in black life. Both

black teams employed a distinctive style of play, executing sharp, crisp passes; dexterous dribbling; and a fast pace in an entertaining style that sometimes baffled white opponents and spectators. Two of the early Globetrotters' players, Tommy Brookins and Harold "Killer" Johnson, became more deeply involved in the music industry and other more nefarious ventures within the popular culture. Johnson earned his nickname for his deadly shooting skills with a basketball before turning to entertainment management and club ownership. Brookins claimed that he had been swindled out of ownership of the team by booking agent Abe Saperstein, a claim that caused his departure to Europe, where he began his music career. He later owned a Chicago nightclub and retired to St. Maarten in the Caribbean. The Globetrotters would win the second professional basketball tournament in 1940 before achieving international fame as comedic entertainers.²³

Black female basketball teams also proliferated during the interwar years, sponsored by churches and businesses. Isadore Channels starred for the Olivet Baptist Church team and then joined the famed Roamers, who played interracial matches with white women. Members of such teams crossed both social and economic classes, exhibiting the more cooperative nature of society within the black communities. Another barnstorming team, the Philadelphia Tribunes, featured Ora Washington. Both she and Channels were multi-sport stars. When blacks were banned from the national white tennis association, they formed their own, the American Tennis Association, in 1916. Channels dominated the national championship during the 1920s, winning four individual titles and one doubles crown. Washington followed suit as the dominant player in the 1930s. Blacks could not play in the USLTA tournament until 1948, and stars such as Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe then rose to prominence, but pioneers such as Channels and Washington sparked the early interest in tennis in black communities. Such women operated within a complex amalgamation of religious, gender, and class relations that pushed the boundaries of femininity long before Venus and Serena Williams transformed the sport of tennis.

Black male athletes such as Eddie Tolan and Ralph Metcalfe became

more conspicuous as members of the U.S. Olympic teams in the 1930s, and the heroics of Jesse Owens in the 1936 Games in Berlin undermined Hitler's assertions of Aryan supremacy. Tidy Pickett, the first African American female to make an American Olympic team, did not enjoy such celebrity but rather endured racist harassment and ostracism in 1932. She persevered to return in 1936, only to suffer another tragic setback before becoming a successful educator in relative obscurity. Pickett's educational attainments defied the stereotype of blacks' mental ineptitude.

While black participation in contact sports such as boxing increased during the 1930s, such activities were associated with the lower classes. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu claimed that one's upbringing within a particular social class determined one's worldview and lifestyle, but the segregated black communities of urban America harbored residents of all classes, from the homeless to millionaires, exposing inhabitants to a greater variety of cultural possibilities. Blacks aspired to greater socioeconomic mobility but found resistance when they tried to contest with whites in the more genteel sports of tennis and golf. As was the case with tennis, blacks had to form their own professional golf circuit, the United Golfers Association (UGA), because the PGA refused to recognize them until 1961.²⁴

Teddy Rhodes, like John Shippen, taught himself to play golf as a caddie, and he dominated the UGA, winning more than 150 tournaments, although the prize money paled in comparison to the white PGA circuit. Rhodes became the personal golf tutor of boxing champion Joe Louis, who also sponsored Rhodes on the black golf circuit. Rhodes and two other golfers sued the PGA for its segregation practices, and he managed to play in the 1948 U.S. Open, still fighting the same battles John Shippen had fought a half century earlier. Illness forced Rhodes's retirement, but he continued to instruct the young black golfers who finally won entry into the PGA in the 1960s, a civil rights progression that eventually produced Tiger Woods. The case of Teddy Rhodes clearly indicated that Jackie Robinson's entry into Major League Baseball, though monumental in its significance, had not produced wholesale racial acceptance in American society. A more extensive civil rights movement and an athletic revolution led

by Muhammad Ali and other courageous black athletes remained to accomplish that task.

This book concentrates on popular culture, and more specifically sport, as one aspect of American history during the later years of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, with the aim to recover the stories of individuals who helped to change the course of the nation. It consciously avoids the stories of more well-known athletes whose lives are chronicled in full-length biographies. It does so within the framework of popular culture in the form of music and sport, which allowed African Americans a measure of opportunity. Even as slaves they were permitted—even expected—to entertain whites. Popular culture allowed them to do so but also provided avenues for greater independence, personal expression, and slow societal change. While many people are aware of the accomplishments and influence of athletes such as Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali, such luminaries of the black sporting experience did not emerge spontaneously. Their rise was part of a gradual evolution in social and power relations in American culture over the course of a half century (ca. 1890–1940s). The freedom of speech and religion that eventually exonerated and allowed for the heroization of Muhammad Ali was built upon the stoicism of Jackie Robinson, who endured the pressures of racism to prove that whites and blacks could cooperate seven years before the United States Supreme Court struck down the separate-but-equal doctrine that endorsed segregation in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. Robinson's sacrifices were made possible by the gradual but temporary acceptance of black athletes as national heroes. Both Jesse Owens and Joe Louis personified American ideals and democratic values when the nation needed their physical prowess to destroy the Nazi myth of Aryan supremacy in the 1930s, but once both men had accomplished their task, they were relegated to their former status of second-class citizens. Both suffered bankruptcy, and Louis died a pauper.

This book addresses the stories and hardships endured by those pioneers who paved the way for Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali to bring about social change. They too contributed much to the larger story of our collective history by their heroic confrontations

with the entrenched racism of their times to bring about the incremental changes that allowed for Jackie Robinson to make his historic breakthrough. They did so by courageously crossing racial, social, political, economic, and cultural boundaries in an expression of human agency in the confrontation of a repressive white domination. Their arduous efforts resulted in a richer, better, and more inclusive American culture. The book follows a chronological order to provide for historical contextualization and to analyze the gradual progress, and at times remission, of the cultural flow. Historian Renee Romano has asserted that “Once a past no longer proves useful, it recedes into the pages of books and archives rather than circulating in the broader culture.”²⁵ This work attempts to rescue the meaningful lives of a handful of athletic pioneers from the dustbin of history and reclaim their significance. It addresses, to some degree, the incomplete story of the nation and the historical amnesia that afflicts many of its inhabitants.

Notes

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12. James E. Odenkirk, "Sol Butler," in Wiggins, *African Americans in Sports*, 55.
13. Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 4.
14. David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 428.
15. Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," in *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74–82 (quote, 80). See also Gwendolyn Bennett, "Wedding Day," 191–97, in the same collection, for the story of Paul Watson, an African American boxer-musician who also resided in Paris.
16. Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson*, 150, 164–95.
17. http://boxrec.com/search.php?status=all&cat=boxer&first_name=Harry&last_name=Wills&submit=Go&pageID=3 (accessed November 24, 2013); Dennis Gilda, "Harry Wills," in Wiggins, *African Americans in Sports*, 408–9. Wills's record does not include another 19-1-3 record with five more knockouts during the World War I era, when sportswriters rendered the decisions as boxing was officially banned in most states.
18. Andrew M. Kaye, *The Pussycat of Prizefighting: Tiger Flowers and the Politics of Black Celebrity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).
19. Gerald R. Gems, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 61–62.
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23. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/finding-your-roots/stories/famous-relatives/mu-ancestor-tommy-brookins> (accessed July 27, 2013).
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