

Minorities and Stardom

The majority of players on every team in the National Basketball Association are African-American. White boxing champions are rare. A far greater proportion of professional football players are African-American than would be expected based on the size of the African-American population. Furthermore, African-Americans began to excel in sports long before the Civil Rights Movement broke down barriers excluding them from many other occupations. This has led many people, both African-American and white, to conclude that African-Americans are born with a natural talent for athletics. How else could they have come to dominate the ranks of superstars?

The trouble with this biological explanation of African-Americans in sports is that it ignores an obvious historical fact: It is typical for minorities in North America to make their first substantial progress in sports (and, for similar reasons, in entertainment). Who today would suggest that Jews have a biological advantage in athletics? Yet at the turn of the century, the number of Jews who excelled in sports far exceeded their proportion in the population. And late in the nineteenth century, the Irish dominated sports to almost the same extent as African-Americans have done in recent decades.

By examining an encyclopedia of boxing, for example, we can draw accurate conclusions about patterns of immigration and periods at which ethnic groups were on the bottom of the stratification system. The Irish domination of boxing in the latter half of the nineteenth century is obvious from the names of heavyweight champions, beginning with bare-knuckle champ Ned O'Baldwin in 1867 and including Mike McCool in 1869, Paddy Ryan in 1880, John L. Sullivan in 1889, and Jim Corbett in 1892.

The list of champions in lower-weight divisions during the same era is dominated by fighters named Ryan, Murphy, Delaney, Lynch, O'Brien, and McCoy.

Early in the twentieth century, Irish names became much less common among boxing champions, even though many fighters who were not Irish took Irish ring names. Suddenly, champions had names like Battling Levinsky, Maxie Rosenbloom, Benny Leonard, Abe Goldstein, Kid Kaplan, and Izzy Schwartz. This was the Jewish era in boxing.

Then Jewish names dropped out of the lists, and Italian and eastern European names came to the fore: Canzoneri, Battalino, LaMotta, Graziano, and Basilio; Yarosz, Lesnevich, Zale, Risko, Hostak, and Servo. By the 1940s fighters were disproportionately African-American. Today, African-American domination of boxing has already peaked, and Hispanic names have begun to prevail.

The current overrepresentation of African-Americans in sports reflects two things: first, a lack of other avenues to wealth and fame, and second, the fact that minority groups can overcome discrimination most easily in occupations where the quality of individual performance is most easily and accurately assessed (Blalock, 1967). These same factors led to the overrepresentation of other ethnic groups in sports earlier in history.

It is often difficult to know which applicants to a law school or a pilot training school are the most capable. But we can see who can box or hit a baseball. The demonstration of talent, especially in sports and entertainment, tends to break down barriers of discrimination. As these fall, opportunities in these areas for wealth and fame open up, while other opportunities remain closed. Thus, minority groups will aspire to those areas in which the opportunities are open and will tend to overachieve in these areas.



Yankee Sullivan was the first great Irish-American prizefighter. In 1853 he lost the American heavyweight championship in a bare-knuckle bout lasting thirty-seven rounds. The first American to win the world heavyweight championship was also named Sullivan (John L.). He held the title from 1882 until 1892 when he lost it to another Irish-American named James J. Corbett, who in turn was succeeded by an Irish-American named Bob Fitzsimmons. In the late nineteenth century, nearly every famous boxer in every weight class was an Irish-American.