

In an important theoretical contribution to racial and ethnic relations, Hubert M. Blalock (1967) was one of the first to explain why minorities more rapidly overcome discrimination in sports. Let's consider several of his propositions.

First, Blalock argued, work groups differ in the extent to which an outstanding individual can bring success to the whole group. A worker on an assembly line, for example, does not increase the earnings of other workers by working faster. But a great quarterback or a great hitter can transform an average team into champions. Thus, Blalock theorized, the more an individual can increase the benefits of all work-group members, the less that group will discriminate against minority members. This will be particularly so when it is easy to judge how much a person could add to the group's success.

To illustrate Blalock's point, consider an all-white baseball team, many of whose players are prejudiced against African-Americans. However, they also want to win the pennant and the World Series, but they need a better power hitter to do so. Such a team will be inclined to ignore their prejudice against African-Americans if they have a chance to get a star hitter who is African-American.

Blalock also suggested that when employers compete intensely for talented people, they will be much less likely to discriminate. Because such competition is the essence of management in sports, highly talented minority players will be an irresistible temptation for owners and managers. Discrimination should cease in sports long before it does in most other high-status occupations. Blalock's proposition also implies that less successful teams would take the lead in ending discrimination, whereas the most successful teams would resist it. In fact, however, during the many years when they routinely won the pennant and the World Series, the New York Yankees were the least integrated team in baseball.

Thus, the overrepresentation of an ethnic or racial minority in sports often signals that group's early progress in struggling up from the bottom of society. However, the real signal that a group is making it comes when their overrepresentation in sports begins to decline, for it means that young people of this racial or ethnic background have other possible roads to success. This is not to suggest that it is better for people to become lawyers or dentists than to become linebackers. (I much prefer to watch a linebacker fill a hole than a dentist.) But no group should face such limited opportunities that playing sports is their only escape

from poverty and prejudice. The overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic minority in sports does not reflect inborn athletic talent any more than their underrepresentation in science reflects an inborn lack of academic talent. Instead, both reflect limited opportunities.

These same principles apply to overrepresentation in the entertainment world. The early success of African-Americans in music, for example, led to the belief that they were born with a "natural sense of rhythm." Again, when opportunities are few, people will concentrate their efforts. African-Americans who could play musical instruments, dance, sing, or write music dedicated themselves to perfecting their skills, as did other ethnic groups when their opportunities were limited. Like athletic talent, entertainment skills are very visible and easily demonstrated. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson could have become a star just by dancing on a street corner (which he often did even after he was world famous). Louis Armstrong's trumpet playing was as obviously inspired as Michael Jordan's dunk shots. To claim that Fats Waller couldn't play the piano would have been as silly as to say Joe Louis couldn't punch. As in sports, barriers of discrimination tend to fall early in the entertainment industry.

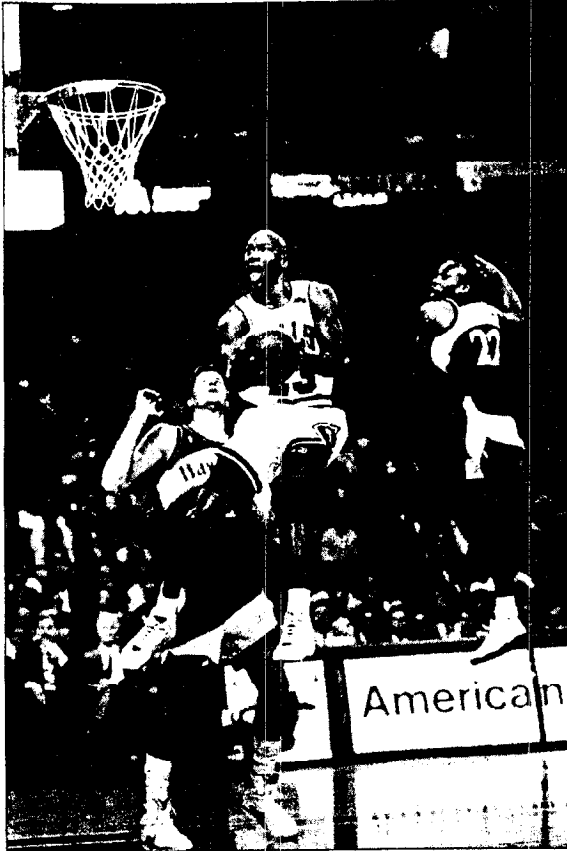


A CLOSER VIEW

SCHOLLAERT AND SMITH: DO WHITE FANS REJECT "TOO BLACK" TEAMS?

If the visibility of outstanding individual talent is the key to minority stardom, then fans should rapidly come to place much greater value on ability and performance than on race or ethnicity. But in recent years there has been much media concern about the negative consequences for fan support of teams that have become "too black." The argument is that although sports fans readily embraced the first African-American superstars, they have grown increasingly restive as teams began to have substantial numbers of African-American players.

These worries have become quite vocal as professional basketball has turned into an African-American-dominated sport. By the late 1960s, African-Americans made up more than half of the players on the average National Basketball Association team, and



Michael Jordan walks on air. The immense popularity of the Chicago Bulls' superstar is entirely consistent with the research results of Schollaert and Smith that white fans care about winning, not about the racial composition of a team.

today the average team is about 75 percent African-American (Schollaert and Smith, 1987). This has led both white (Halberstam, 1981) and African-American (Edwards, 1982) observers to suggest that problems loom for the future of the NBA, and perhaps American basketball in general, because white fans can't identify with teams that are nearly all-African-American.

Through it all, however, as the NBA teams have grown increasingly African-American, average attendance has risen. So what's the truth? Recently, two researchers who specialize in the sociology of sport decided to find out.

Paul T. Schollaert and Donald Hugh Smith of Old Dominion University, famous for its powerhouse

women's basketball teams, decided to see if the racial composition of NBA teams influenced attendance. To do so, they gathered data on the percent of African-American players and total attendance for all NBA teams annually over fourteen years, from 1969 through 1982. Their aim was to see if shifts in racial composition correlated with shifts in attendance. But to do this they also had to gather data on other factors as a guard against spurious findings. They argued that fan support is affected by winning. So they collected data on the won-loss record. They also hypothesized that star players might boost attendance even when a team was not having an outstanding season. They measured this by the number of each team's players named to the All-Star Game each year. They also included data on annual ticket prices for each team.

In addition, Schollaert and Smith proposed that attendance may be influenced by the location of the arena (suburban or central city) and by its seating capacity, because this determines the number of tickets a team could possibly sell. They found they had to remove the Portland Trailblazers from the analysis because the team plays in a small arena that has been sold out for every game for years—hence, there has been no variation in Portland's attendance.

Characteristics of the metropolitan area within which teams are located might also affect attendance. Schollaert and Smith thus included data on the population, reasoning that where there are more people there are more potential ticket-buyers. Data on median income for the area also were included on the basis that fans with more money can buy more tickets. The percent of African-Americans in each area's population was noted to make sure that as a team increased its proportion of African-American players, a rise in attendance of African-American fans didn't offset and therefore hide a loss of white support. Finally, the number of other local major league sports franchises was included because these offer competition for fan support. (The Portland Trailblazers attribute their annual sellouts in part to the fact that they are the only major league franchise in town.)

So what were the results of this study? *The racial composition of teams did not influence attendance.*

The major determinant of attendance in a given year is how many games the team is winning that year. The next most important factor is arena size. A close third is a winning record the year before. Next is the total population from which the team draws. Fifth is the number of All-Star players. Finally, median income of the area and ticket prices had weak effects on

attendance. The percent of the population that is African-American, number of competing franchises, and location of the arena didn't matter.

Schollaert and Smith concluded that the widespread belief that white fans resent African-American dominance of basketball is itself a myth rooted in "racism"—in this case, a racial stereotype of whites as bigots.

Whatever the case, the fact remains that these results are consistent with the acceptance of African-Americans in entertainment long before there even was an NBA. For example, whites flocked to hear the famous all-African-American big bands of the swing era, such as those led by Count Basie, by Duke Ellington, and by Lionel Hampton. In fact, these bands performed primarily in front of white audiences.