

TABOO

Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It

by Jon Entine

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*Reviewed by John Valentine
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TABOO is a 340-page compendium of historical, cultural, and scientific information purporting to demonstrate a genetic connection between race and athletic performance. Written by Jon Entine, who wrote and produced the 1989 NBC documentary *Black Athletes: Fact and Fiction*, it has generated considerable controversy and has been reviewed by such disparate publications as *National Review*, *The New York Times*, and *Scientific American*. It is accessible to a general audience and would be of interest to undergraduate and graduate students alike. It has an index and extensive end notes.

The goal of a reviewer is to state the author's thesis and to shed some light on the issues that it raises. In *TABOO*, however, Entine weaves into a seamless web two different and competing theses concerning genes, race, and athletic performance. This gives *TABOO* a "now you see it, now you don't" character that leaves the reader unclear as to what exactly Entine is arguing.

The first of Entine's two theses is a measured genetic-environmental thesis that deserves our serious consideration. It leads us to look equally for genetic and environmental variables by positing a simple reciprocal relationship between genes and environment in which "genetics and environment are part of an endless loop, each reinforcing and reshaping the other" (p. 289). In social scientific terms, Entine's first thesis posits an "autocatalytic feedback loop" in which neither genes nor environment are designated as the primary operative variable. Not only does our environment set the parameters within which our genes express themselves, our genes also "set parameters" within which our environmental life experiences "express" our biological capabilities (p. 263).

As a result of natural selection, these genetic parameters may differ among *races*, where *races* are understood in the current scientific sense as simple

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“bio-geographic population groups,” or population clusters that have remained relatively isolated for an extended period of time and thus exhibit a “common biological inheritance” (p. 108). Races so understood appear as a “kaleidoscope of populations across a wide range of characteristics” (p. 109). This leaves open the possibility that racial characteristics may have little or nothing to do with skin color, hair texture, or facial features. Moreover, these races may reflect a continuously developing biological reality “as genes are exchanged from one population to the next” (p. 110). This view of race would accommodate biological melting pots such as Ethiopia, Latin America, and increasingly, the United States. These races may nevertheless exhibit, Entine asserts, “functional bio-mechanical and physiological differences,” (p. 83), and these differences may in turn confer “an advantage in some sports” (p. 107). The same bio-mechanical and physiological differences, however, could confer a *disadvantage* in some sports.

Although this bio-environmental thesis is measured and conservative, it has not been generally accepted. As Entine correctly points out, since World War II, the “favored and socially acceptable explanation” of the relationship between race and athletic performance has been “purely environmental.” Any positing of a race-specific genetic variable, he goes on to argue, has regularly met a level of skepticism associated with the tobacco lobby’s questioning of a link between smoking and lung cancer, or creationists’ questioning of the evidence for evolution. Since we cannot conduct controlled experiments, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a one-to-one correspondence between specific gene sequences and specific athletic capabilities. Thus, skeptics, such as evolutionary biologist Jonathan Marks, have argued that “discussing innate abilities is the scientific equivalent of discussing the properties of angels” (p. 289). These skeptics, Entine concludes, have turned the demand for a “smoking gun” into a “straw man” (p. 288).

Entine puts forth his second thesis on genes, race, and athletic performance as a polemical response to the skeptics who defend the purely environmental thesis. Not surprisingly, his second thesis is, for all practical purposes, an inversion of the environmental thesis. It is a “genetic basis” thesis in which our environmental life experiences are relegated to a secondary status and our genes are designated as the primary variable that determines our biological capabilities in any genetic-environmental feedback loop (p. 271). It is a thesis that leads us to look first and foremost for operative genetic variables. According to this thesis, our genes can be said to “explain” our biological capabilities (p. 332).

As a result of natural selection, genes differ among the “races,” where races are now understood in the current socially recognized sense of black, white, Asian, and so on. Thus it is races, as popularly understood, that exhibit “functional biological and physiological differences.” In the case of blacks, these differences confer an “athletic superiority” over the other races that is “overwhelming” (p. 318), and “at least as pronounced” as the disparity in athletic performance between men and women (p. 341). According to this thesis, if we remove environmental barriers and provide sufficient incentives, blacks will dominate any sport.

Entine’s second thesis concerning genes and athletic performance has generated more controversy over the issue of race and biological capability than any work since Herrnstein’s and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*. It is also the thesis that most closely mirrors the views of the general public on the issue of race and sport. Indeed, the very last sentence of *TABOO* reads:

It's time to acknowledge and even celebrate the obvious: It's neither racist nor a myth to say that "white men can't jump." (p. 341)

In chapter 1, Entine writes:

To the degree that it is a purely scientific debate, the evidence of black superiority in athletics is persuasive and decisively confirmed on the playing field. Elite athletes who trace most or all of their ancestry to Africa are by and large better than the competition. (p. 4)

Although Entine cites statistics from the NBA (80% black), NFL (65% black), and MLB (the stars of which are disproportionately black), the evidence he gives for black athletic superiority begins with, and remains tethered to, running. "Running," he asserts, is characterized as the "only true international sport." The smallest of the "major 'races'," those with sub-Saharan African ancestry, he writes, "comprise about 12% of the world's 6 billion population, yet their hold on many sports, particularly running, is staggering" (p. 19). He states that all of the 32 finalists in the last four Olympic men's 100-meter races are "of West African descent," that in international competition "nearly all the distance races" are won by East Africans, and that every men's world record at every commonly-run distance "belongs to a runner of African descent" (pp. 34, 31).

The polemical nature of Entine's second thesis is clearly illustrated by the fact that North African runners of Arab or Berber descent hold 3 of the 14 world records to which he refers. But these Arab and Berber runners are Caucasians or white.

Moreover, the evidence supplied by Entine in support of his second thesis raises serious questions about treating socially recognized categories of race, such as "black," as genetically significant categories when it comes to running. According to the list of world record holders and the graph of the top 100 times for each distance by ancestry that Entine gives us, blacks of West African origin dominate the sprints to the virtual exclusion of East Africans, and East Africans dominate the distance events to the total exclusion of West Africans (p. 33). If there is a genetic basis for differences in running performance among races as Entine maintains, then East Africans and West Africans would be genetically *dissimilar* enough to constitute different races.

This point is further driven home by the performances of Arab, Berber, and European Caucasians that are cited by Entine, as these performances would indicate that the running genes of Caucasians make them better sprinters than East Africans, and better middle distance and distance runners than West Africans. According to Entine's second thesis, then, white Caucasians would be genetically closer to both black East Africans and black West Africans than these East Africans and West Africans would be to each other.

Entine's second thesis also asserts that black athletes "dominate" sports, that given the opportunity and interest, blacks would exhibit a superiority in any sport well beyond what their population numbers would dictate due to a genetic "edge" or "advantage." Yet in deference to his first thesis, which allows for the possibility that a genetic advantage in one sport may be a genetic disadvantage in another, he writes, "There are persuasive physiological and genetic reasons that explain why blacks don't do as well in some sports and why whites, Asians, and Amerindians

dominate in others” (p. 282). Entine argues that the greater bone density and lower percentages of body fat that accounts for the superiority of West-Africans in sports that require explosive power, may turn them into “sinkers” when it comes to swimming (p. 283). Similarly, Entine claims that studies show that Asians, on average, “are generally smaller, with relatively shorter extremities and long torsos, not as fast and less strong than whites and blacks, but are more flexible, and have the quickest reaction times.” He continues:

Although there are certainly cultural factors at work, it is not surprising that Asians are the world’s best at Ping Pong and are among the best in ice skating, wrestling and gymnastics (they don’t call them the “Chinese splits” for nothing.) (p. 284)

Finally, when evaluating Entine’s second thesis, readers of *TABOO* should consider the wisdom of framing the issue of race, genes, and sport in terms of athletic performance having a genetic “basis.” The term *basis* designates genes as the primary variable, and leads us to look first and foremost for operative genetic variables. In the same fashion, the “purely environmental” thesis, against which Entine inveighs, frames the issue of race and sport in terms of athletic performance having an environmental “root cause.” Are we really well served by using the metaphors of a “basis” or a “root cause” to conceptualize issues of race and human performance?