

# **RACE, POWER & AMERICAN SPORTS**

## *Featuring Dave Zirin & Sut Jhally*

[Transcript]

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Sports is contested space. You look at Jack Johnson, and Jack Johnson was somebody who was never shy about telling people that they could kiss his ass. It becomes very interesting when Joe Louis fights Hitler's favorite boxer, Max Schmeling, in 1938. Dr. Martin Luther King, he called Jackie Robinson a "sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom-rider before freedom rides." So, then you get this whole period where the best athletes in the United States are African-American and they're political. That to me speaks to the power of sport, because it forces people to confront ideas and situations that they would otherwise be mentally segregated from. Everybody has a stake in understanding racism and how it operates in our society, and has a stake in understanding how race and sports intersect. Because our ability to understand it or not understand it is the difference between us being shackled or us being liberated.

**SUT JHALLY:** A lot of people who are going to be watching this don't really care about sports, or are actually going to be quite hostile to sports, or to the presence of sports in their lives. Could you, at the outset, say why they should care about how we understand sports and the role that sports play in American society?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Sure. I would start by saying I think that sports is the closest thing to a national language that we have. The most wide-watched television program in the history of the United States is the Super Bowl. It's something that has created a common basis for people across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality to actually have discussions about things that are happening in the country, through sports. I would make the case that we could talk about corporate power, urban planning, gender, homophobia. We could have a whole wide range of discussion and use sports as a way to do it.

One of the most gratifying things I hear with my own work is when people come to me and say, "Hey, I finally had a discussion with my dad or with my mom about U.S. policy in Vietnam forty years ago, and I was able to do it by talking with them about Muhammad Ali, and I used your book to do that. And so we had this whole talk about the sixties and when they were growing up in Vietnam, and I would never have been able to have that talk with them if I didn't use sports as almost an ideological 'Trojan Horse,' as a way to have discussions that otherwise we would not be able to have." Especially in this country where politics is so segregated in terms of, you have your right-wing radio here, you might have your lefty-talk over here, and in sports there is space to have an interesting kind of discussion that, otherwise in this red-state-blue-state country, we're really not able to have.

**SUT JHALLY:** Which comes first? Are you a sports fan first, who then thinks things politically? Or are you a progressive who thinks their values through sports?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Well, I started as a sports fan. I grew up playing every sport in the world. I never really thought about politics that much. But in 1996 there was a basketball player named Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, who did not go out for the National Anthem before games. And a reporter asked him why he was doing that, and he said, "Well, I'm not comfortable with the conflation of patriotism and sports." Now, when he said this, it was incredible. It was a maelstrom of criticism. ESPN was like, "Rauf spits on the flag! Boo-yah!" It was this wild scene, and I remember watching this. I was in college at the time and I'm watching this, and one of the talking heads said, "Well, Rauf must see himself in the tradition of those activist-athletes like Muhammad Ali, Billie Jean King, Tommie Smith or John Carlos." I was sold at that point on the idea that sports is contested space.

It always strikes me as bizarre when people criticize sports, and talk about it as if it's inherently reactionary because of course it's incredibly distorted and warped by our society. But we would never say that movies are inherently reactionary, or art is inherently reactionary, or architecture, or ballet, or dance. Yet, we apply that very stringent test to sports in the way that we don't do to other products of the cultural machine that exists in this country.

**SUT JHALLY:** Why do you think that is? Why has the progressive movement divorced itself from sports in that way?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** I think the sports media complex has done an amazing job of taking some of these great heroes and 'sheroes' from yester-year and performing political root canals on their canine teeth. They take out what exactly it was that made them dangerous and turned them into something far more palatable. So when it's somebody like Muhammad Ali, you learn that he said, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong," but you don't learn that he said, "Damn the white man's money," which is a much different kind of a phrase to say at that time. You might learn about Billie Jean King, that she stood up for Title IX, which gave equal access to women in public institutions in sports; but you don't hear that she lent her name to a magazine ad, that the header of which was, "I had an abortion." So you learn things that make them as appealing to as wide a number of people as possible but when you do that, by definition, you take away what it was that actually made them edgy and dangerous and challenging in the first place.

But I think another reason, as well, is because people on the right claim it so aggressively. And that, in and of itself, provokes a kind of revulsion to them. You've seen it over and over again, the way politicians have actually tried to use sports and use athletics as a way to trumpet themselves. I think those are the reasons why there's been this disconnect. But I would make the case that it's a false disconnect. Sports and the tradition of sports, and frankly the beauty of sports, is something all people should embrace. It's a little cheesy, but I really do believe that sports is like fire. And you can use fire to cook a meal or fire can burn down your house. It's about how you use it.

**SUT JHALLY:** I think you've argued very persuasively that the reason to look at sports is it allows us to look at all kinds of other things. It's an entree in to a discussion of militarism, of gender, of labor relations, of all kinds of issues. Now I'd like to focus on race, because in fact this society has a relatively limited way in which we can talk about race, and what I'm interested in is whether sports actually allow us to have an expanded discussion.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** There's a narrative that's often used as a stand-in for a narrative about race and racism in the United States, which sort of goes something like this: "Segregation, integration, celebration!" And at the end of 'celebration,' you could have Michael Jordan or you could have Barack Obama. Segregation, integration, celebration. But the real history of race and racism in this country reveals a history in this country that's far more complicated and doesn't conform to this very narrow, ahistorical view that it's somehow this stream of progress that's just going through time, and with each year that passes things get more and more accepting, and we become more and more of a colorblind society and all that nonsense.

The actual history of sports shows that sports were integrated after the civil war. The beginnings of professional baseball were integrated. The first Kentucky Derby in 1875, 16 of the 17 jockeys were African-American. All sports were integrated. It would not have occurred to people to have them be segregated, but that changes between 1875 and roughly 1890, and it changes precisely because the North's victory in the civil war became a hollow victory. With the advent of Jim Crow, that's when you see the whitening of sports.

I mentioned in 1875, jockeys were African-American; by 1890, all the jockeys in the Kentucky Derby were white, in just over 15 years. In baseball, African-American players like Moses Fleetwood Walker were physically removed from the field of play by white players saying, "You are no longer a part of this." In fact, the only sport that remained integrated during this time was boxing. And it wasn't because the people who ran boxing were Quakers or anything. It was because they knew they could make money by pitting a white boxer against a black boxer for the purposes of stoking up racism and stoking up racial animus. They always knew where the limit was, though: they never let an African-American actually become the heavyweight champion until Jack Johnson literally ran down Tommy Burns, and became the champion that way. And then after Jack Johnson became the first African-American heavyweight champion, then you get into a very interesting discussion about race, racism and white supremacy.

**SUT JHALLY:** Oftentimes when we talk about race, we think race is about black people or Latinos. But, in fact, what's always left unsaid is that it's always whiteness, and that it's white identity that frames everything. So what does Johnson tell us then about what is going on with white identity?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** What it tells us at this particular time in U.S. history – this was a time in U.S. history where lynchings, on average, took place 2 out of every 3 days. But there was another dynamic happening as well, which was the beginnings of real urbanization and the flight North from the South by African Americans who traditionally had been

sharecroppers and worked the land, moving into urban centers in places like Chicago and New York. And, as all these things are happening – bam! Here's Jack Johnson, heavyweight champ.

At the time there was a prevailing stereotype, and it was that African-Americans not only didn't have the mental acuties to succeed in sports, but they also didn't have the physical acuity. Which is really interesting when you think about the stereotypes that developed over the course of the twentieth century, like "black people are good at sports, but not good at other things." But, back then it was, "Oh, they're not good at sports either. Because sports requires discipline and training, and a level of physical skill, that black people just are too lazy and too wayward to actually be able to do."

And this is where, to me, sports gets very interesting. Because Jack Johnson fought in a way that was highly cerebral. He was influenced by martial arts, the way he was able to hold his hands and lean back: he was incredibly, incredibly cerebral. People recognized that and it was like, "This is not right." And, on top of that, Jack Johnson was somebody who was never shy about telling people that they could kiss his ass. Now, that was very rare back then. He openly consorted with white women in public, which was considered absolutely shocking and terrible.

And in the white community, a cry goes out for a "Great White Hope" to restore order to the world. And then Johnson fought that "Great White Hope" – a gentleman by the name of Jim Jeffries. He fought him on Independence Day, July 4<sup>th</sup>, and knocked him out of the ring. And the aftermath of that fight is very fascinating because there was fury in white America that Jeffries would lose so badly, and they organized lynch mobs and they went after black people. After Johnson beat Jim Jeffries, you have the largest simultaneous racial uprising that this country had ever seen or ever would see until the assassination of Dr. King. And this happened after a boxing match. So, people who say that there's no real connection of sports and politics, I mean all you need to do really is look at the case of Jack Johnson. Look at the statements by his opponent Jim Jeffries who said, "I'm going into this fight for one reason, and one reason only, and that's to prove that the white man is better than the Negro." And then, in the aftermath of the fight, Jim Jeffries saying, "The better person won."

Boxing always figures so strongly in this narrative of race and sports. And it became this very powerful metaphor in the black community, and in the white community as well, with this idea of saying, "Ok, here's the level playing field." And, if given an equal shot symbolized by just a couple of gloves, black people can prove that they are the equal of – or better than – whites. And there were so few avenues in U.S. society where greatness among African-Americans, particularly African-American men, could be shown. There was entertainment and there was sports. Now the issue with entertainment was that often it was minstrelsy, which is a discussion all to its own. But in sports it wasn't minstrelsy – it didn't have that edge to it of, "You're here to laugh at us." It was like, "No, you're going to marvel at what we can do." And it becomes very interesting when Joe Louis fights Hitler's favorite boxer, Max Schmeling, in 1938.

**Media Clip – Sports Announcer, 1938:** *Joe Louis defends his world heavyweight championship against former titleholder, Max Schmeling.*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Joe Louis, as an African-American, was representing America against Hitler's guy who was going to prove Aryan superiority. Now, not all of the United States was cheering on Louis. There are records of editorials in Southern newspapers, for example, saying that they hoped Max Schmeling would show Joe Louis who the master race really is. And when Louis finally did beat Schmeling, it is mind blowing. It was a moment that, for a lot of people, said, "Maybe we can have a seat at the table in the United States of America and maybe, if given an equal shot, we can be a part of something as well that's bigger than us." And I think that's always been there with sports, this idea of saying, "If the playing field is level, then we can accomplish something." Because that's been the argument in the United States that exists to this day about black people in this country. It's like, "Well, is it institutional racism? Or is it just they're not trying hard enough?"

**SUT JHALLY:** In terms of this relationship between whiteness and the challenge posed by black athletes, how would Jesse Owens, for example, fit into this?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Jesse Owens is arguably the greatest athlete this country has ever produced. He won 4 gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. And those Olympics almost didn't happen because they're known as the "Hitler Olympics." And so when Jesse Owens and Mack Robinson, who was Jackie Robinson's older brother, and Ralph Metcalfe, and all these terrific African-American athletes, they go overseas to actually compete in these Olympics – and they dominate at those Olympic games – it was seen as quite the stirring rebuke to Hitler and to what he stood for.

So, if we're talking about how race operates in terms of how it makes white people feel and how white people understand race, what you see in the 1930s is a real insecurity about what it says that they needed people who looked like Jesse Owens to be successful and have international bragging rights. And what does that say to their security about what this country is and what it represents?

**SUT JHALLY:** And then how does Jackie Robinson fit into this? The stories often told about him are as this kind of trailblazer, but there was an incredible amount of resistance.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** The first lie about Jackie Robinson is this idea that he was the first African-American professional baseball player in this country. No, there were professional black players after the Civil War in this country, and you had professional players in the Negro leagues in this country. What he was, was the person who broke the color barrier in major league baseball. And by 1949, he was the second most admired American in the country. Second. Number one was Bing Crosby, which I just find very funny. It wasn't Truman, it wasn't Dwight Eisenhower, it was Bing Crosby.

Then you have to ask the question: why did white America embrace Jackie Robinson? Why is that? It was because Jackie Robinson was seen as "doing it the right way." And that

quote – my family is from Brooklyn and that's how I was taught Jackie Robinson. He was the person who did it the right way.

**Film Clip – The Jackie Robinson Story (1950):**

*[Branch Rickey] All I can see is your black face, that black face right over me, so I come up and punch you in the cheek! What do you do?*

*[Jackie Robinson] Mr. Ricky, I've got two cheeks.*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** When Jackie Robinson came into Major League baseball, people threw baseballs at his head. People threatened his life all the time. And yet, he kept his mouth shut, he took all the abuse – physical and mental – and he did his job. And that was seen as a model of how all people of color should confront racism: "Don't protest. Don't march. Don't get riled up by communists. What you should do instead is just do your job. And that's how you show that you're ready for a seat at the American table." That was the Robinson myth.

Now, the reality was far more complicated. Dr. Martin Luther King, he called Jackie Robinson a "sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom-rider before freedom rides." That was because Jackie Robinson did have a Civil Rights consciousness. He was a barnstorming speaker for Civil Rights after his playing career in the late 1950s. And he was somebody who was never afraid to actually speak out about politics.

**Media Clip – Jackie Robinson:** *[speaking at a press conference] ...and all of the guys who are saying that we've got it made through athletics, it's just not so.*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** He had a political column that was in the sports page of the *New York Post* for years after his playing career. So, he was never the quiet person who didn't believe in riling things up. That wasn't him. But that was the him that the media chose to present to the public.

So, he was able to sort of assuage white anxiety while at the same time, I would argue, do irreparable damage to himself and his own psyche. Robinson died in his early fifties, and his family always said he died of stress by having to have that mantel on his back. If people see pictures of Jackie Robinson in his early fifties, he doesn't look fifty-two, fifty-three. He looks seventy-two, seventy-three. And you see the way it aged him to actually carry the weight of white America's hopes of how black people would choose to act in the context of a racist society.

**SUT JHALLY:** Let's look at Muhammad Ali.

**Media Clip – Muhammad Ali:** *He thinks that he's the real heavyweight champ but after I'm finished, he'll just be a tramp. Now I'm not saying this just to be funny, but I'm fighting Ernie because he needs the money.*

**SUT JHALLY:** And again, through this lens of what Muhammad Ali meant for white identity and notions of whiteness.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Well, Muhammad Ali represented an incredible challenge to whiteness, white identity and also, masculinity. He challenged people on multiple, multiple fronts. First, the outlines of the story for people who don't know it: He was born Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., named after his father of course, Cassius Marcellus Clay. He was from Louisville, Kentucky, which was a segregated community at that time. He wins the Olympic gold in Rome in 1960. He comes back with his gold medal swinging from his neck. He goes to get a cheeseburger in Louisville; they deny him a seat. And as he later said, his gold medal found a home at the bottom of the Ohio River, out of his anger at how he was being treated. And he started looking for answers. He found those answers in an organization called The Nation of Islam, that was most known at the time by its spokesperson, Malcolm X.

**Media Clip – Malcolm X:** *We are non-violent with people who are non-violent with us.*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Even before he finds the Nation of Islam, even before he adopts those politics, he's loud. He has a voice. He speaks out. So even when he's apolitical when he's a teenager – eighteen, nineteen years old – he represents a threat to the establishment. I mean, he would tell everybody he was "the greatest." He would also talk about how pretty he was, all the time.

**Media Clip – Muhammad Ali:** *...I'm pretty, and can't possibly be beat!*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Now, for white Americans – particularly white male Americans who identified as straight – the heavyweight champion is supposed to be like this exemplar of masculinity. And so to have the heavyweight champion talk about how pretty he was, that in and of itself was very disturbing. And you see this in the way sports writers talked about him. They called him derogatory names in the press all the time. They called him, "The Louisville Lip," "Cash the Brash," or, my personal favorite, "Gassius Cassius."

When he fought Sonny Liston, who was known as the "Big Ugly Bear" and known as the scariest person alive, it became fascinating how many of these sports writers who used to see Sonny Liston as being this great villain – this thug who had done prison time and all the rest of it – all of a sudden Sonny Liston was their hero. James Baldwin – more recommended reading – wrote this amazing essay about Sonny Liston in the context of young Cassius Clay, and about how white America was now turning to Sonny Liston to be the person who has always existed in the black community. The person who white people would send in to punch out and shut up the young, brash Negroes who actually want to say something about the world and open their mouths.

**SUT JHALLY:** Would it be fair to say then, when looking at the fight between Clay and Liston, that it's actually really about whiteness? That is a different version of... I mean, it's white anxiety playing itself out.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** It's explicitly about whiteness because Malcolm X was down there with Cassius Clay in his training camp, and Malcolm X has got reporters around him and he says, explicitly, "Cassius Clay will be our first champion. Jackie Robinson wasn't a champion. He was a white man's champion. Cassius Clay will be the black man's champion." So, this isn't something that we're sitting here today as cultural theorists trying to figure out. I mean, here he is, he's an Olympian, he's got a gold medal, he doesn't swear, he doesn't drink, he's got no criminal record, he comes from a fine home. Malcolm is just mocking the pretensions that people have and the stereotypes that people have. Because Cassius Clay – and this is rare for a boxer – he came from a stable, working-middle-class home in Louisville. Two-parent home. And here he is being derided as this great villain. Why? Because he talks too much and he hangs out with Malcolm X.

So, they fought and Cassius Clay wins, and next day he tells the world that he's now a member of an organization, The Nation of Islam, that believes that white people are devils. He's explicit about this. And he goes by the name "Cassius X" for a while and he signs his name 'Cassius X'. He goes with Malcolm X, and they go visit the U.N. and visit people like Kwame Nkrumah and people from the recent, emerging revolutionary states in Africa – the postcolonial countries that are developing throughout the world. And he's seeing himself as an explicitly political, and explicitly pan-Africanist figure. Now keep in mind this is the early 1960s. There's not a vocabulary for this, there's not an understanding of this. It hasn't spread to college campuses.

When you had somebody like a Muhammad Ali, who then says that, "I am not going to fight in Vietnam,"

**Media Clip – Muhammad Ali:** *My intention is to box, to win a clean fight. But in war, the intention is to kill, kill, kill, kill and continue killing innocent people.*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** The dominant thought in society was 'well, people who don't fight are cowards. Men who don't fight, their masculinity and their sexuality should be questioned.' That's what made him, I think, so important historically.

He really became the forerunner of what became known as the revolt of the black athlete in the 1960s. So, then you get this whole period where the best athletes in the United States are African-American, and they're political. So, the best basketball players are Bill Russell and a college player named Lew Alcindor, who later became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. They're both explicitly political, explicitly on the side of the black freedom struggle. In football, you have Jim Brown. In track and field, you have people like Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and the whole rebels who are part of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. So, if you were a sports fan at this time, you were forced by necessity to confront all of these issues. That, to me, speaks to the power of sport, because it forces people sometimes to confront ideas and situations that they would otherwise be mentally segregated from.

**SUT JHALLY:** So what happened from the '60s to the present, where sports seems so separate from what's really going on?



**DAVE ZIRIN:** I think it's very connected to the death of the movements themselves. Jim Brown, he said a few years ago, "The Muhammad Ali I loved is gone. The Muhammad Ali that America loves," and he is very beloved now, he's like a walking saint, "is not the Muhammad Ali I knew." Ali's genius, but also his great failing, was that he was somebody who always sort of rose and fell with the movements that existed around him. So in 1968, he's visiting college campuses and speaking out against the war, but by the 1970s he becomes this symbol of reconciliation in the country. In a few short years, he became somebody who the Louisville City Council actually voted to renounce his Louisville citizenship. Like, "You are no longer a son of Louisville by our votes!" And, something like five years after that, they're naming the main thoroughfare in Louisville 'Muhammad Ali Boulevard.' And now there's a Muhammad Ali museum in Louisville.

It's part of how people who are famous, if you don't take control of your own politics and your own identity, you're going to be used. You're going to be used to further whatever the aims and needs are of what I call the 'Athletic Industrial Complex' – this multibillion dollar global industry, of which Ali, in his present speechless state, has become an important icon and front man for.

**SUT JHALLY:** One of the conversations that seems to be really difficult to actually have – people don't even know how to engage this, because it seems so fraught with danger – is how to talk about African Americans and physical ability, and why they dominate sports like they do. The argument is made that blacks dominate sports because they are biologically built for it and they're just better at it. They are physically built for professional sports in a way that white people aren't. What do you think about that idea?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** I honestly think that that is a construction created by white people to justify why they're being bested by black people in sports. "Oh, it must be biological, otherwise we'd be better, cause we're better at other stuff." Almost like they've got a tail that allows them to run faster than they would otherwise. I think black dominance in sports is entirely a social construction. I would ask people to think about it a certain way, like if people of African descent are naturally better basketball players, then why don't African countries do better in basketball at the Olympics? Why does Spain excel in Olympic basketball if it's about blackness and whiteness, how do we understand that then? Why does Jamaica dominate the sprints but Barbados doesn't, for example? Why in some countries do you see this kind of dominance and in other countries you don't? And I think you have to look much more at issues of history, infrastructure, coaching and culture as a way to understand why people make the choices they make other than biology, which I think the roots of the biological argument have to do with white people wrestling with white supremacy and being like, "How does white supremacy exist if that person there is better than me on the athletic field? Well, it must be biological."

**SUT JHALLY:** One of the things that has to happen for that to be completed is that the black body has to be seen as just a black body, separated from the intellectual.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** I'll tell you where you see that very strongly is in the growth of fantasy sports and advanced statistics in sports, as well. You see this... I mean, I don't want to overgeneralize; obviously people of color take part in fantasy baseball, basketball, what have you. But it is overwhelmingly a white past time. What's so interesting about it is I grew up wanting to pitch for the Mets, and my fantasies all revolved around playing. And you see people grow up now, and their fantasies are about managing...

**Media Clip – Fantasy Football player:** [at a football game] *Drew Bennett, you're on my fantasy team but I'll never start you, because you suck!*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Their fantasies are about intellectual control over people of color who are playing the sports themselves. And it's about what Dr. King talked about: "thingifying" people. It's this idea of turning people into objects and objectifying them to a point where they don't have brains, they don't have opinions, they don't have political ideas: They're an advanced statistic, they're a widget and you are the person in this fantasy world who is Bill Belichick. That's the ideal. You are the all-powerful white father who's in charge of all these players and figuring out where they go, and exercising your dominion over them intellectually. And I've been critical of it for more than any other reason because what disturbs me is this idea, less about people wanting to do fantasy sports which can be a fun diversion, what have you. No judgment on how people want to spend their time. But what disturbs me about it is when people divorce the athletes from their humanity as part of doing it.

**SUT JHALLY:** How do you think this plays out in discussions around 'the black quarterback' and why, perhaps, those have changed over the last twenty years?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** One of the remarkable things about it was how long it lasted. It was still very controversial in 1999 when the Philadelphia Eagles drafted Donovan McNabb to be their quarterback. And that particular draft had two other African-American quarterbacks drafted in the first round. And that, in and of itself, caused a big firestorm in a lot of those communities.

And the thought around it was that the person on the field who's the quarterback is the field general, and they need to have a certain set of leadership and intellectual qualities that African-Americans, for whatever reason, just do not possess. And so you have generations of African-American quarterbacks who entered the NFL and were asked to change position. They said you can play in the NFL but you have to be a wide receiver, you have to be a safety. Even though, I would argue that to be a safety or to be a wide receiver requires similar intellectual acuity to be able to do that as a quarterback. But it was much more about superficialities, and much more about what would be acceptable or presentable to a fan base. Specifically to a majority white fan base, which of course is the National Football League. For the main reasons that I think it's a way for people, particularly white people, to feel superior to athletes themselves, to the people they're cheering. And to actually have the comfort of feeling like you are cheering a child, instead of a grown man.

What's been interesting about it too that I've seen, is that the ascension of the black quarterback happens at the same time with the ascension of a style of play-calling in the NFL, which is very modern – where quarterbacks actually have little radios in their helmets, and it's piped right into their helmet as far as what the plays should be. So, the quarterback – instead of being the 'field general' to use the militaristic term as they used to be called – they become an instrument of the coach, or of this person in the booth calling down plays. It's with the ascension of that, of the quarterback being seen as just another moving particle in this war game of football, that you've also seen the ascension of the African-American quarterback at the same time. It's like we can be comfortable with black quarterbacks because they're not really in charge. At least according in the minds of fans, they're not really in charge.

I would counter that and say that actually every position on a football field, especially quarterback, is far more intellectual than fans even realize. Whether you play running back, quarterback or cornerback, you are required to memorize a playbook that is so thick, I would venture to say that most doctoral students would have trouble with it. Things that are going on a football field are all about the mental process and the combining – the hybrid if you will – of the mental and the physical that's taking place on the field. And yet, I think it's far more comfortable for fans to think of this kind of a godfather who's making everything okay and safe from the safe confines of a sideline or a booth, that oversees all that's happening on the field.

**SUT JHALLY:** Of a white godfather.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Of a white godfather.

**SUT JHALLY:** A lot of our discussion, almost all of it in fact, has been about male athletes or the black male athlete. How do black female athletes fit into this? Do you think there is the same kind of fear in white identity when it comes to black female athletes?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** It's interesting. Bill Rhoden – who is the sports writer for the New York Times, the author of *40 Million Dollar Slaves* – he once said that the most striking part of the history of African-American women in sports is the absence of that history, the absence of a recorded history of African-American women who have played sports.

There is a long history in the U.S. Olympic movement throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century of trying to figure out ways to bar African-American women, saying they had unfair advantages, biological advantages. One member of the International Olympic Committee once spoke about creating a separate hermaphrodite category just for African-American women. You've seen this in the last couple of years with a South African runner named Caster Semenya, who was accused by her white Australian competitors of being 'intersex'. The way they raise these issues was seen by people in South Africa as being deeply, deeply racist – as if her body type did not conform to what they wanted it to look like, or they thought it should look like, and therefore there must be something wrong with her. She must be part man.

This idea of femininity in African-American women, and how African-American women define their own femininity, is a story all its own. There's a whole culture of them, when they run track and field, of having these incredibly long, elaborate fingernails. And you marvel at the fact that they're running 100 meters at world-class speeds with these incredibly elaborate designed fingernails. It's part of asserting their own femininity in space that tries to actually deny them their own sense of being women and, as always, try to treat them as something... as if they're somehow 'off' in a way that's deeply insulting, as it is about trying to create very strict gender binaries: men acting like men and women acting like women. African-American women athletes were always seen as operating in a space between those two poles, and that's something that they have both suffered for and tried to negotiate over the course of many decades.

**SUT JHALLY:** So, how would you broaden this out to really thinking about Latinos and the issues around immigration, and about the history of Latinos in the United States?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Let's start with the history, because the history of Latinos in sports in this country is very much also a history of color in this country. Because Latinos who were light skinned enough had access to playing in the major leagues, to use baseball as one example in this case. But, if you had dark skin, you played in the Negro leagues. Roberto Clemente, the great superstar from Puerto Rico, he once said that he didn't know he was black until he came to the United States from Puerto Rico. Partly it's about the way that the United States chose to see, or not see, color, and the way the actual color of your skin meant more than where you were from or what your particular cultural heritage might be. It is that you were judged on this very superficial basis of skin color. So, because of that, the history of Latinos is very similar to the one that we've been talking about. About one where access to excellence would be denied and yet, in the world of sports, a layer of heroes were able to be developed strictly on the basis of the fact that they were able to show that they were able to achieve in the context of a racist society. That's the broad history of it.

But, you go to modern times right now and you get to a much more interesting history where you can't talk about Latinos in sports in the United States without talking about globalization. We have a situation right now in the United States where the number of African-American players in major league baseball has dropped dramatically over the last twenty years, from roughly a quarter of all players to eight percent of all players. At the same time, the number of Latino players has gone up to almost thirty percent of all players in Major League Baseball. Now, why has this happened? It's happened for a very, very basic reason. Major League Baseball found that they could develop talent on the cheap by investing tens of millions of dollars into specifically the Dominican Republic, but also Venezuela and Puerto Rico as well – but mostly the Dominican Republic. And you can sign players there when they're as young as fifteen years old, for as little as fifteen hundred dollars. Baseball then goes through these players, and they send them to these baseball factories or academies in the Dominican Republic, and one out of a hundred are able to get even a minor league contract. But that's one of the brutal things about baseball, is that you need to field a whole team of people to be able to figure out who the one person might be

who's good enough to go to the next level. So they field whole teams of people and then there's no real educational component at all in these academies. And then they're all thrown in the human dumpster to lives of poverty in the Dominican Republic, and the one person whose able to make it then goes to play in the major leagues. So it's a very problematic, highly exploitative relationship that speaks to globalization.

But, it also speaks to the degradation of our cities in the United States. Because one of the reasons why we had African-American baseball players in this country is that there was infrastructure in the cities to actually produce professional athletes. You had Boys and Girls Clubs, you had public school athletic leagues, you had little leagues. And these are the very things that have ended up on the chopping block as our cities have become gentrified and as poverty has been pushed out to the suburbs. That's been a phenomenon over the last twenty years, the suburbanization of poverty and the gentrification of our cities, and the cutbacks of our public school system. This is what has been faced by black America, and this is why sports sociologist Harry Edwards – he calls the position of black athletes in the United States the 'canary in the coalmine.' This idea of what does it say about the United States that there is less opportunity now for black athletes to develop out of poor and working class communities than there was twenty years ago, thirty years ago.

So, a lot of Latinos who come into this country, who come in as immigrants, they don't have access to sports period. It's created a situation that I think says a lot about where this country is, about lack of infrastructure in the cities, and about these billion dollar professional sports leagues scouring the earth for talent and being able to find it in areas that are much more cost-effective than it would be if, say, they invested money in the United States.

**SUT JHALLY:** Let's bring this right through to the present, and perhaps extend it a little bit in terms of the racial lens that we're looking at this through. How does Jeremy Lin fit into this discussion of race?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** It's not just that Jeremy Lin is of Asian descent; it's actually the way he's playing.

**Media Clip – Basketball game:** [Sports broadcaster] *...and that's a steal by Jeremy Lin!*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** This is where you get to this history, because he's playing in a way that, according to racism and racial stereotypes, he's not supposed to play. He plays with an incredible flair and style, which I think for a lot of fans – particularly white fans, but we can just say non-Asian fans – that does not compute with their stereotype of how maybe the first Chinese-American player would play. I think if you ask people and they had the truth serum, they would expect the player to be very intelligent and technically proficient, their face an unsmiling mask. Instead, Jeremy Lin throws these incredible passes. He has a blue tongue for goodness sakes, from his lollipops or whatever on the sideline, but he'll stick it out on the court. He's got a lot of swagger.

To me, it harkens back to things like Jack Johnson. You look at Jack Johnson, and Jack Johnson – if you'd ask people then, "how would the first black heavyweight champion fight?" and people would probably say, "He'd be a big galute throwing these undisciplined punches, and he'd probably connect with a lucky shot and become champ." No, instead, you have Jack Johnson who's this incredibly cerebral fighter. And that challenged people's notions about all African-American people. I think you see that extend now to Jeremy Lin. It says something in and of itself that we can be critical of about this country, that oftentimes it takes athletes of a particular ethnicity to actually educate the rest of us – particularly white America – that these folks are not in fact invisible, and that they are part of this country.

Everybody watching this film right now – whether you're white, brown, black, what have you – has a stake in understanding racism and how it operates in our society, and has a stake in understanding how race and sports intersect. Because our ability to understand it, or not understand it, is the difference between us being shackled or us being liberated. And I think sports actually provide avenues for both enslavement and avenues for liberation. But that's about us, that's about how conscious we are when we approach this subject.

[END]