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African Americans In Early US Sports

The nature of competitive sport is to glorify and recognize great players based on their skill and ability. However, not all athletes got such treatment throughout US history. The discrimination showed toward African American athletes throughout the nation was an unfortunate aspect of early sports culture. Despite this, though, African Americans continued excelling at the very activities they were thought to be unfit to play. College and professional level sports gave African Americans a chance to prove themselves by their abilities to a widely closed-minded country.

Up until the 1960’s, a hate-based law system tormented African Americans throughout the South known as Jim Crow. This cruel series of discriminatory measures stripped African Americans of their rights as US citizens and equal human beings. Much of this system was legalized after Plessy vs. Ferguson, a Supreme Court case from 1896 legalizing dejure segregation. The effects of Jim Crow laws devastated black communities, and denied African Americans the right to vote through devious methods. For example, a literacy test to allow voting would include naming all Vice Presidents and Supreme Court Justices throughout US history. The most shameful aspect of the Jim Crow South was lynchings. By 1930 around 3,587 people had been lynched in the US. The South was no place for an African American to seek equal treatment in any way, but especially in sports.

In the 1950’s and 60’s, basketball offered a way out of poverty for many talented young African Americans. Historically black colleges had their own teams, leagues and tournaments exclusively between black schools. In many cases these schools gave African Americans a sense of community they hadn’t before experienced. However, if you were a black athlete playing for a white college, this was not the case at all. Due to defacto segregation of college basketball, white colleges would only have one or two African American players per team. Black players on those teams were discriminated against their whole college experience as well. After college, there were still some professional options for African Americans though. The Harlem Globetrotters were arguably the most famous black team ever in the US and they still exist today. Their quick style and comedic play inspired youth across the nation. Although at this time African American players still faced incredible amounts of discrimination, doors were beginning to open in the college and professional world.

Another huge area for African American professional sports was football. In the late 19th century, football was just starting to gain popularity both at college and pro levels. Football had a shorter season than baseball and basketball though, and didn’t draw the same crowds other sports did at the time. For that reason it wasn’t uncommon to have one or two black players on a team. Charles Follis was one such player, and he is credited to being the first black professional player as of 1904. According to Charles Ross, despite his incredible athleticism he was a constant target of verbal abuse by white fans. Unfortunately, much of Follis’ legacy is not remembered due to the highly unorganized nature of early 20th century professional football; however, the opportunities made for African American athletes lasted far longer.

The role of African Americans in developing college and professional sports into what they are today is a very important one. The amount of great black players that never got the recognition they deserve may never be known, but the sense of pride African American athletes provided their communities was both powerful and significant. The world of sports would never be the same if it had stayed a white-only experience.