INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the history of scientific outlooks on the connections between ethnicity and race. It has become an American past time to analyze and compare different racial groups based on their ability to perform athletically, physically, physiologically, and psychologically. For more than a century geneticists, physiologists, sociologists, and sports commentators have given their points and views on the links between race and performance. This paper will take a look at the time period from the 1950s through the 1970s to determine the changes in theories about the influence of racial dynamics on human performance—especially in regards to athletic ability.

BACKGROUND

For many of centuries race and ethnicity have shaped American lives. Race and ethnicity has been used to shape and mold the way an individual thinks, speaks, and performs. These two terms have been used interchangeably and have evolved from century to century. These terms have effectively kept up racial barriers in organized sports as well as in developmental growth in different racial groups. Some of the most controversial scientific arguments about racial and ethnic differences occurred in studies inspired by athletic competition. These studies first began to surface around 1890, black athletes were prohibited from competing with white athletes. Even though these stigmas were not only present within the black race, they were most commonly negatively singled out. There were several great athletes that paved the way for black participation in sports.

Marion Motley, a superb football player, and Jackie Robinson, one of baseball’s greatest players, were pioneers of desegregation in professional and college sports. Motley was a student at the University of Nevada in 1940 and he played for three seasons until he was called into military service. Motley was one of the first black players to play for the University of Nevada. He was noted as being one of the best running backs in the nation by commentators and newspaper sports journalists. In 1946 he played for the NFL’s Cleveland Browns as a running back. In 1968 he became the second black to be inducted into the Football Hall of Fame. When Motley eventually retired he went to the NFL looking for coaching positions, however black coaches were not accepted or sought after in the NFL. Later on, Motley tried to start a pension plan for retired players of his generation. This attempt failed, but he helped lead the way for the civil rights movement. In 1947 Robinson broke through the color barrier in major league baseball and took the
field with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He played as a first baseman and earned respect from
baseball fans and other league players. Even though Robinson was an exceptional player
his time in professional baseball was “bitter sweet.” He endured a tremendous amount of
racism and hatred from baseball members and spectators. Jackie Robinson was put
through a number of triumphs playing in the major league; in *Americas Obsession*, a
sports writer denoted that “Throughout it all he has remained a gentleman and credit to
the game, as well as to his race.” Robinson was known to be a symbol of the struggles of
blacks in achievement to basic civil rights. Due to the help of Motley and Robinson,
segregation in professional sports came to an end in the 1950’s.

The Harlem Globetrotters came into existence in 1927. The Globetrotters used
comedy and mockery mixed with an array of basketball skill. They used dribbling skills
along with tricks to entertain millions across the United States and internationally. The
characters of this team were athletically talented; however they were silly and not at all
serious, they reinforced stereotypes of the black athlete of being lazy, and undisciplined.
In Richard Davies book, *Americas Obsession*, he noted, “Even though they made a
mockery of the rules and invariably won their well-scripted “games” these talented
Sambos in garish red, white, and blue stripped uniforms did nothing to advance the cause
of racial equality.” In 1949 Althea Gibson and in 1963 Arthur Ashe made their presence
known on the tennis court. They were the first black man and women to play the sport as
a profession. Gibson won the Wimbledon and U.S. Open tournaments, only to be
scrutinized by the public for her shyness and lack of verbal contact with reporters.
During the 1960s golf was a very segregated sport. Lee Trevino a Hispanic and Charlie
Sifford and Lee elder black men played regularly in Professional Golf Association
tournaments. They were one of the first men of color to brake through the racial barriers
in golf, unfortunately some of these same barriers are held up today. In 1950, the first
three black athletes signed contracts with the National Basketball League. Nat Clifton,
Earl Lloyd, and Charles Cooper became professional basketball players; nonetheless
there were still many racial constraints in place. For many years there were rules that
stated each team cannot carry more than four black players, and no more than two blacks
can be in the starting line-up. In the 1960s these rules quickly began to disappear, in the
1970s blacks made up more than 50 percent of the NBA. Despite all of the black athletes
in the NBA its popularity grew, and so did the number of blacks in the league.

There were several myths and stereotypes regarding black athletes. It was a
widely believed notion that blacks lacked discipline and they did not have the mental
capabilities to lead a team. For instance, several professional and college coaches used a
stacking method to assemble their teams. Stacking is when a position is reserved or only
suitable for a particular individual, for example a quarterback is supposed to have great
athletic and mental ability. These positions were saved for the white players because it
was believed blacks were not capable of handling the challenge. Blacks were stacked at
positions where athletic skill rather than brains were valued such as in baseball blacks
were concentrated in the outfield. In football blacks were most likely to play safety and
running back. In the sport of basketball blacks were overrepresented as forwards, and
whites were used for guards and centers. In collegiate athletics it was believed that the
black athlete lacked the capability to compete in the classroom. They were recruited to
Another myth, which is still greatly used in this day in age, is blacks had innate physiological advantages, which allowed them to jump and run faster than whites. Blacks were said to have different bone structures and more muscles than whites. In the *Anatomy of Scientific Racism: Racialist Responses to Black Athletic Achievement*, Albert McGall, a Yale track coach suggested that “Maybe black sprinters got better leverage—and a little advantage over white sprinters—because of the projecting heel bone that was frequently found among blacks.” Dean Cromwell, University of Southern California and Olympic track coach suggested “Blacks excelled as sprinters because they were closer to the primitive than white men.” Many experts believed that blacks were superior in athletics because of selective breeding during slavery days. It was thought that the superstar athletes were the product of the “survival of the fittest” process during the slave trade. During this time slaves were supposedly bred for strength and size, the biggest man and woman were allegedly forced to have children together so they could survive the harsh environment and work hard and effectively on the plantations. This is what gave blacks the advantage to succeed. Blacks also achieved success because it was said to be a natural physical ability. Many researchers thought these physical advantages compensated for the lack of intellectual power in blacks. In order to cover up the fear of loss to black athletes in sports, the white population began to claim that blacks suffered from low intelligence, criminal tendencies, and inferior physicality. In the *Anatomy of Scientific Racism*, historian David Wiggins notes that many Americans believe that, “blacks could excel in physical pursuits, but not in the life of the mind.”

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to investigate the changes in theories about the influences of racial dynamics in human performance, data was collected from journals, books, and newspapers. A comprehensive literature review was completed over a six week time period. For each journal and article read a summary was typed to reflect pertinent information, the summaries included brief overview, thesis, methodology, definitions of race or ethnicity, and conclusions. There were 30 scientific journals and articles as well as three books used to conclude my findings.

There were a few limitations with the literature review methodology. There was no direct contact with actual athletes, professions, or society to receive first hand thoughts and opinions. Time was a critical part of the research, not every journal or book could have been read to receive the majority of the professional’s theories and hypotheses. Furthermore, the articles were set in the past, which made them critical references to the historical outlook on sports history. Overall, historically the material was extremely applicable because the material dated to the past; it was a recording of history in its purest form.
LITERATURE REVIEW

THE ERA OF THE 1950s

A new calculation about the link involving race and performance first arose when the black athlete began to become prominent in the sports world. This is when sports became a full time business instead of a pastime for Americans. Blacks were first generally permitted to compete in the Olympics because it was an international event. With the Olympics in full swing with black athletes taking home medals, the next rational thing to do was to question their achievements. As previously stated, blacks were shunned away from professional sports but this quickly came to an end after World War II. People generally felt that if revenues could be increased or win and loss records could be improved, change was worth it. When sports team owners discovered that large profits could be made in baseball, football, and basketball, the owners and their coaches abandoned their tradition on racial discrimination in favor of making money. Following the pioneering feats of the athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Marion Motley in the 1940s, the segregated world of American sports began breaking down in the 1950s.

In the 1950s race and ethnicity were defined in several different ways by researchers. In this decade some researchers believed psychological, anatomical, genetics, and skin color classified humans into one particular racial group. Others thought that geographic location along with genetic variations that occurred within a population due to the environment grouped a race. In “Race and Athletics”, Sir Adolphe Abrahams observed, “How can one define racial characteristics in a race which is a combination of races?” At this time there was a deep fascination in comparing white Americans to black Americans, Africans, and other population groups.

During this time blacks flourished in track and field events. They achieved major successes in running short and long distances as well as the long jump. Achievement in this area was attributed to the fact that this was the first sport in which blacks were able to compete against whites. According to experts, “Seeing blacks as subhuman made it easier for whites to explain how and why blacks could defeat whites in contest of physical skill, after all, the argument went, blacks were more “animal” than whites and thus should be expected to be more physical”.

In the 1950s there were a large number of studies done on genetics and anthropometric measurements, and also a number of studies conducted on infants and school aged children. In these studies the researchers were most interested in the size and calculations of an athlete’s body and the development and fitness levels of the children. The basic and most common argument of this time was that black athletes had bigger and stronger muscles than white athletes. Blacks were believed to have a quicker reaction time, and thus they were made for certain positions and sports. Blacks were thought to have larger forearms and hands, longer legs and narrower hips, and lower breathing capacities when compared to whites. In the Journal of Sports History, Methany suggested that the larger forearms and hands of the black athletes gave them an advantage in throwing and jumping. “In jumping the longer, heavier arm is able to develop greater
momentum, and this momentum, when transmitted to the body as a whole, would assist blacks in jumping”. She also noted that the longer legs and narrower hips would aid blacks in running because it permitted longer strides. However, the lower breathing capacities of the blacks hindered their performance in long distances and long duration activities. When measured blacks were found to have lower body fat percentages and denser bones than whites. This was both an advantage and disadvantage to the black athletes. The lower body fat percentages handicapped blacks in the swimming arena. The low measurements of fat were believed to have an adverse affect on floating and buoyancy as well as the denser bone mass. The denser bone mass gave the black athlete a sturdier body, which could with stand hits and forceful contact on the sports field, it also increased longevity.

Children and infants were a hot topic of discussion in the 1950s. The concept of race was used in a cultural sense to refer to the mental and intellectual abilities of an individual. It was widely believed that white children had a developmental advantage over black children. Black children were thought to develop slower than whites because of their racial background, environment, and socioeconomic level. The socioeconomic status of the blacks were significantly lower than the whites, therefore it was believed that this had a negative affect on the learning and motor skills of black infants. Throughout the decade several test were conducted which put earning, parental status, and environment into perspective. In the 1953 School of Hygiene and Public Health, an article titled “Further Observations on the Behavioral Development of Negro Children” reported a study as well as conclusions from other similar studies. This particular study was a follow up to a previous study conducted on white and “Negro” infants. The families of the infants were equal in age, income, and environment. They were tested for behavior in gross motor, fine motor, adaptive, language, personal, social, and emotional fields. The purpose of the study was to lessen the controversy on the slow development of “Negro” children. There were many conclusions drawn from this study. Both the “Negro” and White infant had the same behavioral development. There was no exceptional characteristic that can be called a “racial” difference among the infants. When compared, both “Negro” and White infants had increased development compared to male infants. When parental background was examined there was no developmental advantage due to parental education, pigmentation or regional origin. Children living in poor households and with other young siblings did not do as well developmentally as wealthier families or families with one sibling. The onset of external depressive influences was said to start to take effect during the first year and a half of the infant’s lives. At this age the study said that the children can recognize the color of the examiner’s skin and this may have caused some negative outcomes in the results. The majority of the studies before this supported the idea that “Negro” children and adults did not do as well as whites on intelligence test. Klineberg conducted a study in child development, he stated that “As a test of the theory that environment and educational handicaps may account for the failure of “Negros” to perform as well as whites and for their decline in performance, he has shown that the longer a “Negro” school age child has resided in the north the better his performance on intelligence testing.”
THE ERA OF THE 1960s

In the 1960s the controversy on race and human performance became even thicker. Motor development and performance as well as culture were linked to race, several stereotypes stemmed from this. The arguments were blacks could not perform as well as whites because of low socioeconomic status and limited resources. Blacks were expected to lag behind in academics and overall development. Additional studies were conducted and more researchers became interested in the debate. During this time many racial barriers in American’s sports fell in rapid succession as the integration of intercollegiate and professional sports picked up speed. The 1960s were a turning point in the dismantling of racial segregation on American playing fields.

During the 1960s the definition of race in scientific studies did not change too much. Dr. Malina stated, “The American Negro, a relatively recent taxonomic group, came into existence about 300 years ago. Although it was essentially a triracial hybrid, serologic data indicate that the major contributions to the formation of the American “Negro” stock have come primarily from two sources—African and European. The genetic background of the American white is equally diverse, representing contributions from a variety of European sources. Hence, when studying the growth of American Negro and of American white children, the broad range of genetic amalgamation and the mixed genetic character of the populations must be considered.” For the most part in this decade race was based on simplistic terms, such as “Negro”, black, and white according to the individual’s skin color. Ethnicity was also a big term in this decade; it was based on a population’s origin or location.

In the 1960s more studies were geared toward comparing blacks and whites in a physiological and anthropometric sense. During this time blacks still began to excel and succeed noticeable in track. Therefore, researchers looked once again for an answer to this unknown phenomenon. In the December 1969, *Journal of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation* the study “Physiological and Anthropometrical Comparison of Negros and Whites,” was published. Studies were conducted on body measurements, such as height, weight, body fat percentages and limb lengths. Physiological characteristics were also studied, such as reaction time, respiration, pulmonary functions, body temperature, and sweat mechanisms. Blacks made up 12% of the United States population and they were well overrepresented in athletic events. Some researchers argued that it was partly due to the social contributions of the environment and economic boundaries. In 1967, there was a study conducted on college black and white men and women to determine height, weight, arm length, trunk length, reaction time, lungs, respiration, body temperature and sweat mechanisms. The white college students were slightly taller than the black students but there was no great athletic advantage because of the differences in height. Blacks were found to be heavier than whites, but they had less body fat, heavier skeletons, and a more muscular physique. They were found to have longer arms and legs compared to whites; however blacks had shorter trunks or sitting height when compared to whites. Quicker reaction time and running events have been linked to better performance in running events. This study showed evidence of quicker reaction time in black athletes, which in return makes them faster runners. Daniel
believed that the speed of the black athlete was not natural it is mainly influenced by training. However, Hipple concluded that white athletes that train can get faster and stronger but black athletes do not. Blacks were found to have lower vital capacity rates than whites. Blacks and whites were found to have the same number of sweat glands, but the black athlete’s glands were more present and superior during performance. Also, black’s body temperature did not raise as high as the whites during hard physical labor, in return the black athletes body was more efficient in cooling off. The size of the black athlete was said to give an advantage to contact sports such as football, but it gave a disadvantage to sports such as running and jumping, however the more muscle blacks have the better he would be in any event.

Swimming skills and buoyancy was another trend that was greatly researched in the 1960s. Blacks were labeled as non-swimmers for an extremely long time, and this stigma plagues lags behind them still to this day. Blacks were speculated as being disadvantaged swimmers because they did not have the opportunity to practice due to lack of money and facilities. It was reported in the March 1964 issue of the Research Quarterly “Buoyancy as Predicated by Certain Anthropometric Measurements,” that the black male had less body fat as well as larger skeletons and body measurements when compared to white males. These characteristics aided in the low buoyancy level of the black male, which resulted in more sinking and less competency. Large numbers of blacks have very low degrees of buoyancy. Buoyancy helps an individual learn efficient swimming skills as well as float, tread water, scull, and perform synchronized water stunts. As a result, these differences slowed their floating and swimming ability considerably; therefore the white men had buoyancy and swimming advantages over the black males.

Physical fitness levels of school age children were also a popular research issue in the 1960s. Several studies were conducted comparing the different fitness levels of black and white children using the national measurement test from the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (AAHPER). The study of racial differences in appearance comparing whites and blacks has been the forefront of the decade. Researchers claimed that finding an advantage in one race meant there would be a physical advantage for that race later on in life in Olympic or professional sports. There were speculations that black children performed better on the AAHPER test than whites and were fitter. In a 1965 journal article titled “Relationship between Race and Physical Fitness,” this notion was proved to be true. Tests were administered to 633 upper-elementary school children to test for physical fitness and agility, to find a possible relationship between race, motor abilities and physical fitness. The AAHPER test included sit-ups, pull-ups, shuttle run, standing broad jump, 50-yard dash, softball throw, and 600-yard run-walk. The results of the physical fitness test concluded that blacks exceeded whites in a majority of the test given. In the “Relationship between Race and Physical Fitness,” William and Scott concluded that blacks from disadvantaged households had an accelerated gross motor development, however they did not find this in higher status households, therefore they concluded that this accelerated development was due to social factors not racial factors. Black boys surpassed white boys in 5 out of
the 8 tests administered. Black girls exceeded the white girls in 4 out of the 8 tests given, and the white girls exceeded them in 2 of the test given.

**THE ERA OF THE 1970s**

The 1970s sparked a whole new genre of interest in research. There were even more studies being conducted on race and human performance with a special interest in examining female athletes. Since the early 1970s there has been a sense that discrimination no longer occurred in sports, this was based primarily on the large number of blacks in the three major sports teams, football, baseball, basketball, as well as track. During this time females began to flourish in the sports world and racism surely still existed.

In the 1970s the definition of race was quite similar to the previous decades. Individuals were classified and labeled according to the color of their skin. The most common terms of this decade were Caucasian, which described people of white or European decent, and black, which describe individuals of the African American mixture.

In the 1970s there was a bulk of research done on black and white female fitness levels and motor performance. The accepted belief was that like black males, black females were superior in fitness levels when compared to white females. In the December 1977 journal of the *Research Quarterly*, an article entitled, “A Comparison of the Motor Performance of Black and Caucasian Girls Age 6-8,” was the typical study of the 1970s. In this study ninety black and Caucasian girl’s ages 6, 7, and 8 years were administered 28 test items. The test items measured speed, muscular power, agility, flexibility, balance, muscular endurance, and cardiorespiratory endurance. There were few differences recorded among the black and Caucasian girls for flexibility, muscular endurance, speed, balance, and muscular power. The girls attended public and private schools in Natchitoches, Louisiana. The black girls were superior in the dodging and agility run, the Caucasian girls performed better on the shuttle run and grip strength tests. The eight year old girls were superior to the six year old girls on the majority of the tested items; therefore it was found that motor performance increases with age. It was concluded that the black girls had a greater speed than the Caucasian girls.

**DISCUSSION**

The majority of the studies examined for this paper started out with a negative idea toward black athletes. After the studies were completed the data and information collected usually refuted the negative hype about black athletes. The idea of selective breeding, genetic and physiological advantages, and lack of intelligence were all disproved by the data. A large number of researchers during the 1950s through the 1970s gave an explanation of black supremacy in sports, as it is a combination of different factors. There is not just one factor that makes black athletes superior. “Athletic ability is clearly a function of many genes in interaction with a number of other variables such as economic background, motivation, facilities, and coaching.” Stanley Eitzen and George Sage suggested in the 1978 issue of *Sociology of Sport*, “Two of the more likely reasons
for black dominance in sport were occupational discrimination and the sports opportunity social structure within American society. The authors pointed out that black athletes might be more determined and motivated to succeed in sport because their opportunities for vertical mobility were limited in American society. Sociologist John Phillips stated, “Black athletes tended to be successful in those sports where they had access to coaching, facilities, and competition, while being underrepresented in those activities where such items were unavailable to them.” With all the studies dedicated to finding the cause of black sport supremacy researchers cannot come up with a definite or concise answer to black dominance. Sociologist James LeFlore, wrote an essay entitled, “Athleticism Among American Blacks,” he acknowledged that “Genetic, environmental, and economic factors certainly played a part in the athletic success of black athletes, but believed that a more comprehensive explanation for black dominance in sport was grounded in what he termed “subcultural and informational poolings.”

CONCLUSIONS

There was never a clear-cut answer on why blacks tend to be more superior to whites in athletic competitions. However, we are left with studies that concluded that there was not a huge difference between the two racial groups when compared intellectually and physically. One is only left to believe that there are a combination of factors that help aide in the achievement and excellence of a great athlete regardless of their racial make-up.

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