

# Chuck D's scientists

*A white professor argues that today's cult of black athleticism is part of a long tradition of racism.*

BY MARK WILLIAMS

***Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race***

By John Hoberman

Houghton Mifflin

341 pages, \$24.95

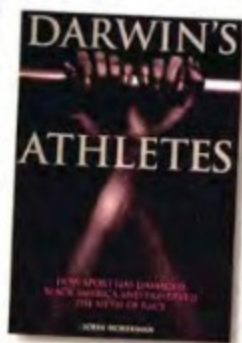
**S**.A. Cartwright, an antebellum southern physician, diagnosed a mental disease of slaves that he called drapetomania: victims suffered from an insane desire to run away from their masters. In 1869, a British doctor, John Davy, told an audience that, contrary to many contemporary images of the African as enfeebled, "the average Negro has muscles as well developed as any European." Whereupon one listener took exception on the grounds that he had never seen a black run. In 1890, E.D. Cope, America's leading paleontologist and evolutionary biologist, fulminated: "The highest race of man cannot afford to lose . . . the advantages it has acquired . . . by mingling its blood with the lowest. . . . Not only is the mind stagnated, and the life of mere living introduced in its stead, but the possibility of resurrection is rendered doubtful or impossible."

## Living in the past

Nearing the millennium, in the era of the Net and the Human Genome Project, voices are claiming (once again) that this is the end of history as we have known it—that, for instance, the old determinisms of racialism are burning themselves out. But readers of *Darwin's Athletes* by John Hoberman may find themselves contem-

plating the words of William Faulkner: "The past isn't dead—it's not even past."

*Darwin's Athletes* provocatively argues that America's current stereotyping of black athletes is little more than a continuation of the racist tradition that has long emphasized blacks' physicality as concomitant with limited intelligence. Darwin once speculated that "an animal possessing great size, strength, and ferocity" would probably fail to evolve the "higher mental qualities" necessary for civilized life. Charles



Murray and Richard Herrnstein, authors of *The Bell Curve*, cite "the dominance of many black athletes" as the single African-American achievement they can think of. Canadian psychologist and professor J. Philippe Rushton is more overt. In a 1989 interview on the Geraldo Rivera show, he said, "Even if you take something like athletic ability or sexuality, it's a trade-off: more brain, or more penis. You can't have everything." Meanwhile, sportscasters and sportswriters describe white players in terms of intelligence, will, integrity, and work ethics; blacks are usually framed in terms of brawn and natural ability. One survey of the 1988-89 season noted that 80 percent of commentators' references to stupid plays were about blacks. Television images of white coaches in corporate-looking jackets and ties directing their sweaty, half-dressed players convey the sense of an almost colonial hierarchy.

Mr. Hoberman, a white professor at the University of Texas, uses a detailed analysis of today's cult of black athleticism only as his starting point. The midsection of

*Darwin's Athletes* documents how two centuries of the pseudoscience of Caucasian physiological supremacy and consequent black inferiority modulated into the concept of black physiological overdevelopment and consequent mental inferiority that is favored by modern racists.

The urgent problem, Mr. Hoberman claims, is the damage that African-Americans have done to themselves by collaborating in this cult of black athleticism and "the compensation fantasies that a racist white society is only too happy to play along with." He maintains that blacks' exclusion from other paths to high achievement has encouraged them to confer nearly messianic status on "race heroes" like Jack Johnson, Jackie Robinson, and Jesse Owens.

## Fueling anti-intellect

Now, 50 years of integrated sports having shown that whites may indeed appreciate black athletes without acquiring much liking for their black fellow citizens, African-Americans frequently continue to focus on athletic ability as the primary symbol of their endeavors and to view the world through its lens. Thus, a black

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sportswriter in 1936 tried to conflate the achievements of Joe Louis and Albert Einstein, saying of the great boxer that "he associates ideas and responds with lightning-like rapier thrusts about as rapidly through the medium of mind and muscle as an Einstein calculates cause and effect in cosmic theory." Mr. Hoberman insists that this athleticizing of black identity feeds anti-intellectual attitudes and a disdain for academic achievement that

**“Vision:  
the art of  
seeing things  
invisible.”**

*Johnathan Swift*



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are ruinous for African-American youth facing life in an increasingly knowledge-based society.

To anyone who sees him as another white entrant in “the growing black-pathology business,” the author rejoins that no black intellectual would write so critically about his people’s sports fixation, and that critics should remember “the disaster . . . where twice as many black women as black men are pursuing degrees, and the number of

black men receiving Ph.D.’s is actually falling.” This contentious book’s final chapters confront racial biology directly. Having noted how the terrible ordeals of the Middle Passage and slavery have functioned as theaters of fantasy into which both whites and blacks project their eugenics theories, Mr. Hoberman argues against the politically correct antiracist efforts to deconstruct racial categories or to suppress peer-reviewed research of biomedical racial

differences. Instead, the future of antiracist science lies in scrutinizing the other side's arguments. But Mr. Hoberman points out that although differences between individuals are far greater than those between racial categories and that race is impossible to define in wholly consistent ways, medical researchers have little question about these categories' usefulness for human taxonomic purposes, and doctors agree that the needs of black patients would be poorly served by the kind of political correctness that denies racial differences.

### Blind spot

The author of *Darwin's Athletes* is intelligent and thorough, and he delights in pushing his readers' buttons. This reviewer feels that he is sincere and has done valuable work in the process. However, apart from a few asides about "the largely unremarked contrast between the behavioral norms of the quasi-invisible African-American middle class and the highly publicized underclass behaviors that are . . . presented as characteristic of blacks," he seems unaware how many working

African-Americans are unenthralled by the cult of black athleticism.

Most black American working citizens feel that they are consistently misrepresented. Neither celebrities nor criminals, this ordinary class is invisible, behind clouds of toxic imagery, to the larger nation. In another context, the black writer Stanley Crouch has written about the "appetite that America has for vulgarity, violence, and anarchy inside Afro America." While innocent of that appetite, Mr. Hoberman nevertheless underestimates how many black folk—precisely because college-educated black males earn on average 80 percent less than their white counterparts; precisely because housing segregation means redlining, and redlining means higher home prices; precisely because in some families as many as 12 generations labored as animate chattel—know that wealth in their communities will continue to be more dependent on high educational achievement than it is for whites. 🐘

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