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The Image of Paul Robeson: Role Model for the Student and Athlete

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The Image of Paul Robeson

Role Model for the Student and Athlete

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When the lies and myths supporting the 'house-of-cards' social and political structures known as American society are finally erased and when, among other things, the whole story is told about the athletes who really lived up to the ideals of sports, there is little doubt in my mind that the name and deeds of Paul Robeson will figure prominently in that chapter of post-Babylon history.

(Edwards 1971)

Introduction

The image of Robeson as a scholar-athlete is relevant to an analysis of contemporary sports and society. Robeson is a role model for the student and athlete, as his work ethic in the classroom and sporting venues represent the true value of sport (Harrison 1996, 1998). Robeson's legacy should influence K-12 curricula in social science, history and physical education. Three critical questions emerge in any analysis of Robeson as a dominant figure in the American twentieth century: (1) What is the legacy of Paul Robeson as a scholar-athlete? (2) How does the triad of athletics, gender and race represented in Robeson's career, illuminate a discussion of contemporary race relations? (3) How is the image of Paul Robeson as both a stellar student and athlete a viable case study that raises critical analytical questions regarding the status of intercollegiate athletics in the twenty-first century?

In today's society, the term 'student-athlete' has a different meaning than it did 80 years ago (Harris 1998). As a result of ambivalence or even confusion about the role of academic rigour in the lives of competitive players, collegiate athletes sometimes are permitted by those in the university power structure who benefit from this prowess to take any courses that they wish to keep their athletic eligibility. Paul Robeson defined the true meaning of 'student-athlete' with his commitment to education and sport. As a young boy, William Robeson (Paul's father) instilled in him the virtues of hard work and the attainment of knowledge. Paul's father was constructing a 'scholar-baller', a term used to describe an individual who possesses academic and athletic prowess. Salient qualities of the 'scholar-baller' include a willingness to accept the challenge of balancing academics and athletics, the tenacity never to give up when faced with social obstacles, and a commitment to lifelong

learning and intellectual development of the mind and body. The ‘scholar-baller’ is also accepted in both the stereotypical nerd and jock worlds (smart and cool respectively).

By scoring high marks on the statewide test in New Jersey, Robeson capped off a high school career as an outstanding athlete, scholar and orator at Somerville High School. What is even more amazing about Robeson’s achievement is the extraordinary effort he had to make in preparing for the examination. The first part of the test, covering the first three years of high school work, had been held the previous year; but somehow Paul had not known about it then. Consequently, as he recalled, ‘I was faced with an examination embracing the entire four-year course, in the same three-hour period during which the other competitors would only cover their senior year’s work’. Despite this handicap (Robeson was modest about the disadvantage that challenged him), Robeson passed the examination with the highest average ever achieved in the competition (Edwards 1971). This allowed him to attend Rutgers University on a full academic scholarship.

While Robeson would become one of Rutgers prize recruits, he was not embraced by his teammates (indeed, he was beaten up his first day of practice). His brother and father encouraged him to persevere, as thousands of other black men would never get the opportunity he was experiencing if he were to quit. Duberman (1989: 20) captures the quote in his biography of Robeson, ‘When I was out on a football field, or in a classroom, or anywhere else, I was not there just on my own. I was the representative of a lot of Negro boys who wanted to play football, and wanted to go to college, and, as their representative, I had to show I could take whatever was handed out’. See Figure 1.

Using the system

Paul Robeson’s life and career are paradigms of resistance to racial stereotyping. The image of the black athlete with a powerful intellect merits further consideration.

In the exhibit publication *Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen*, Willis, in her chapter ‘The Image and Paul Robeson’, raises some pertinent questions while deconstructing the popular image of Robeson holding a football: are these athletic images the beginning of the visual construction of Robeson for consumption by white America? To what extent did Robeson believe in the construction of his All-American athletic persona and to what extent did he control these images? Harris is no doubt illuminating the dilemma of representation, masculinity, autonomy and the black presence (Edwards 1971).

Robeson was a standout athletically, lettering in four sports and earning

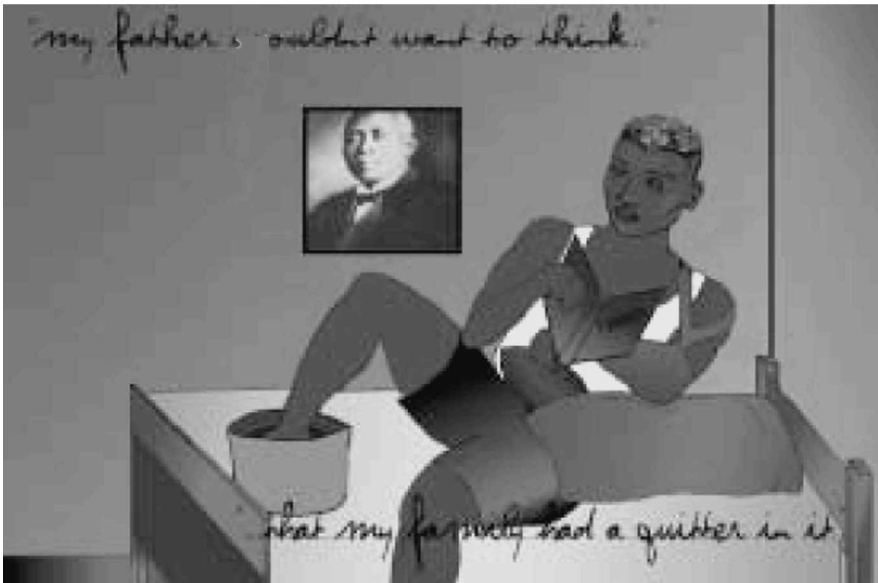


Figure 1 Robeson faced overt racism versus the covert racism that African-Americans deal with today in sports. He never wanted to disappoint his father under any circumstances. Courtesy of The Paul Robeson Center. Artist: Jennifer C. Johnson

distinction as a two-time Walter Camp first team All-American in football. He was also member of the Cap and Skull Society, Phi-Beta Kappa, Philoclean society, Mathematics Club and the champion each of his four years of the Debate Team. The primary image of his athletic prowess and the perception of his peers are best articulated in his senior yearbook:

Paul LeRoy Robeson
 All hats off to the Robie men;
 All honor to his name;
 On the diamond court or football field
 He's brought old Rutgers fame.

(1918 yearbook)

The omission of Robeson's intellectual achievements is not necessarily a racial slight, but is rather a historical neglect of the value of education when connected to athletic individuals. Robeson's legacy is important; both as a thinker and as a sportsman, but analysis in this context of Robeson's life reveals fewer than 20 scholarly papers (published or unpublished) and only one book by Lloyd Brown examining the young Robeson. Martin Duberman has written



Figure 2 Photo courtesy of Rutgers University archives and special collections.

the most extensive biography on the entire life of Paul Robeson, with one chapter called ‘Rutgers College’ focusing on the socialization of Robeson in an overly racist academia. Robeson paved the way for thousands of African-American students and student-athletes to experience higher education (not only at Rutgers, but traditionally white campuses around the country). This was only a reality through his perseverance and manifestation of his father’s wishes to stand his ground (literally and figuratively).

Paul Robeson endured both personal and broader cultural struggles while an athlete at Rutgers University. See Figure 2. His triumphs serve as a testament to the courage, perseverance and dignity that Robeson modelled each day of his life. Our nation’s rich history has provided us with many men and women who have served as torchbearers for change and accomplishment. Yet there have been few that have done so in such a multi-talented way that Robeson did academically, athletically and socially. Therefore, in many ways, he serves as the ideal model, particularly for children.

Robeson was much like many early black pioneers involved in school and intercollegiate athletics – they all used sport as a means to an end. Robeson best illustrated this concept while playing professional football for Akron, Indiana and Milwaukee. His earnings went towards his education at Columbia Law School. He used the system, rather than allowing the system to drain physical talents of the short-term hyper-athletic body manifestation in sport.

Robeson kept his ethnic and cultural ties and was recognized by WEB DuBois in *The Crisis* for his academic and athletic achievements. Robeson played basketball for the St Christopher Club, which was sponsored by a church in Harlem. He was well recognized and praised by the black community in New York during his scholar-athlete days. His circle of friends included some of the most respected and distinguished African-Americans during that period of time. These peers included Rudolph Fisher, Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, E. Franklin Frazier, Charles Johnson, William L. Patterson and Hubert T. Delany. Paul concluded his eclectic undergraduate days by extending to the black middle class at the Carlton YMCA in Brooklyn, where the program 'Four Negro Commencement Speakers' was presented. Paul was balancing not only academics and athletics, but the black and white worlds! (Edwards 1971).

Robeson set a standard of excellence for all to follow. He would not accept the narrowly defined position for African-Americans in society created by whites. Instead, he fought for progress every step of the way.

Meaning for the twenty-first century

Studies by Harris (1994) and Comer and Pouissant (1992) demonstrate the powerful influence that athletes have on youths. Disturbing, though, is the alarming number of examples where contemporary athletes embody what is wrong with our society. All too often, children mimic the behaviour of their heroes. Greed, lawlessness and an unwillingness to take responsibility permeate professional sports. The media in favour of sensational stories regarding athletes and their run-ins with the law often overlooks honorable deeds. In contrast to this negativity, Paul Robeson stands as a pillar of dignity and a positive role model for young adults to see the contributions that athletes have made and continue to make.

Lampman teaches eighth grade history, which incorporates curriculum ranging from the Revolution to Reconstruction period of American history at Saline Middle School in Saline, MI. He has created a 12-week course entitled 'Changing Time Issues: How Athletes and Athletic Events have Impacted Social Change in the 20th Century'. In this course, his students examine the social ramifications of events on the playing field. Lampman's course examines athletic heroism and the social barriers that it helped to erode, analysing such notable athletes as Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight world champion, and Babe Didrickson, Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, the Negro Leagues, the Women's Professional Baseball Leagues, Jackie Robinson, Wilma Rudolph, Muhammad Ali, Billie Jean King and Title IX. Contemporary issues in athletics are also addressed once students acquire a strong

historical foundation and appreciation between the union of sport and social change. Athletes of colour and women are the primary focus because of the long history of discrimination that they have endured and, in many instances, continue to endure in our country.

Historically, race has been a heated and divisive issue in our country. Even today, one need only turn on the TV or pick up a newspaper to see examples of ignorance, bigotry and intolerance. In an effort to explain when and how this hatred begins, social scientists have developed an explanation known as the 'sandbox theory'. They argue that young children of different races placed in a sandbox together will harbour no resentment towards one another. Only when they are influenced by outside forces such as friends, parents, television and the media are their views on race distorted. While these young children in the sandbox may fight over the best toys, they would not quibble about building a sandcastle next to a child whose skin colour was a different shade. Racism and intolerance are traits that no child is born with. They are learned traits, traits that are acquired at a very young age. This is why it is so imperative for children to be exposed to the heroes in the struggle for equality such as Robeson. Many children identify with athletes; Robeson teaches the necessity in our culture for tolerance and understanding. Furthermore, he illustrates the power that athletes have to exert positive influences through their unique position in society.

The mass media and its damaging and negative messages directly influence children in our society. Music videos commonly portray women as objects of sexual gratification or sexual promiscuity, victims of abusive relationships, or flighty professionals, while African-American men are often portrayed as athletes or gun-totting rappers, consumed with the pursuit of the almighty dollar. In many predominately white Michigan schools, few opportunities exist for students to have positive interactions with members of diverse groups. However, the opportunity to see negative images of minorities in mass media is quite common. This, in turn, has a stigmatizing impact.

Robeson serves as a beacon for students to appreciate diversity and the importance of his accomplishments serves as a theme for our youth. He was a man who completely shattered and rebuilt the image of the African-American male. Robeson's numerous athletic achievements, which included varsity letters, in four different sports and All-American honours, is a powerful positive model for student's experience. However, both Harrison and Lampman stress the importance of recognizing an African-American man's academic accomplishments. All too often the 'dumb minority jock image' is reinforced by the media and the message hits home with our youth. Robeson earned Phi Beta Kappa honours, was a member of student council and a literacy society on campus, excelled on the debate team and was active in the community to promote black achievement and pride. He was a Renaissance man at the time

when the role of the African-American was clearly established as that of a second-class citizen. During his years at Rutgers and later in numerous theatrical productions he vowed to fight racism, and like W. E. B. Dubois, he worked to uplift African-Americans through his accomplishments. In our current age of shameless self-promotion on the part of many athletes, Robeson modeled selfless acts. This is no more apparent in his willingness to sacrifice his own career to further the achievements of the black race.

Lampman challenges his students to make connections between Robeson and other athletes in the twentieth century. Some see comparisons in the exploits of Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe and Tiger Woods and even Dhani Jones and Drew Henson, two current University of Michigan football players. However, some students come to the conclusion that while all of these athletes are tremendously important, none could boast of the lifetime of accomplishments serving their race like Robeson did. Athletes like Robeson serve as tangible teaching models that are so important to our youth. Robeson's omission from history texts is a travesty; one that must be rectified. His life as a true Renaissance man must be celebrated. However, perhaps what is more important is that teaching values begins at an early age so that our youth grow with the understanding, tolerance and acceptance that Robeson preached and practised throughout his life. According to Duberman (1989), Robeson clearly embraced the idea of being a 'credit to his race'. The fact that Robeson returned after graduation to speak in Whitman's contemporary drama class affirms his acceptance of being black in America and modelling achievement, class and respect.

Role model for all athletes?

Todd Crosset in a session at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, presented 'Role Models: A Critical Assessment of the Application of the Term to Athletes'. Specifically, Crosset examines the hypocritical label disproportionately applied to women and to African American athletes (Edwards 1971).

Crosset's heading 'The Role Model as a Credit to His Race' links what Dr Charles Whitman (an English professor at Rutgers, who took Robeson to see plays by William Shakespeare) encouraged the young Robeson to become a role model for the people of his own race (Duberman 1989). This concept however, is problematic as Crosset (1998) indicates: 'Few worry if a white athlete's negative actions will effect young children. Do black athletes owe more to the community than white athletes? Do black athletes make better role models? Probably not' (Crosset 1998). Shropshire (1996) has suggested that 'role model' is a racially coded term.

Wiggins (1991) meshes the timeless philosophy and contradiction of sport in higher education in the essay ‘Prized Performers, but Frequently Overlooked Students: the Involvement of Black Athletes in Intercollegiate Sports on Predominantly White University Campuses, 1890–1972’. Wiggins provides the views of both the conservative and critical lens:

Some individuals might argue black athletes are provided with opportunities they never could have experienced unless they had been chosen to participate in intercollegiate sport. Black college athletes do travel to exciting places, come in contact with influential people with and outside the university community, and are showered with attention unknown to the vast majority of college students. Unfortunately, these experiences do not necessarily translate into successful professional careers and upward social mobility. The sad fact is, short of abolishing college athletics altogether, there seems little chance of finding large numbers of black scholars, and white scholars for that matter, to grace playing fields in the manner of yesterday’s heroes like William Henry Lewis (first African American All-American in football), Howard Drew (track star), and Paul Robeson (Phi-Beta Kappa scholar). Although black athletes enjoyed a few moments as prized performers in prestigious universities down through the years, the rest of their lives have frequently held out little promise because they bought into a system that overlooked them as students.

(Wiggins 1991: 175)

It is important to examine the stellar example that Robeson offered as a model of the positive possibilities of celebrity, activism and advocacy. It must be an activism infused with a faith, much like Robeson’s, in the whole people, the emergence into full bloom of the last estate, the vision of no high and low, no superior and inferior – but equals, assigned to different tasks in the building of a new and richer human society (Malveaux 1998).

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) published a feature article on the Centennial of Robeson, citing him as a model athlete. See Figure 3. This leaves us suspicious, when one considers the blatant racism Robeson faced. The implications of him as a role model threatens a similar structure of intercollegiate athletics today. As Wiggins (1991) aforementioned, athletic scholarships are not provided for student-athletes, especially African-Americans from low-income families, to become scholar-ballers. If the model of Paul Robeson were realized we would see movies that showed black athletes saying ‘Show me the knowledge’ rather than ‘Show me the money’. The popular culture phrase ‘It’s all about the Benjamins baby’ might be represented as ‘It’s all about the cranium baby’. Elite historian and scholar John Hope Franklin concludes our paper best:

Paul Robeson was one of the great icons of his own time. He was a force to be reckoned with and even his severest critics recognized that indisputable fact.



Figure 3 Robeson had a balance and used sports as a means to an end versus an end in itself. Courtesy of The Paul Robeson Center. Artist: Jennifer C. Johnson.

Indeed, Robeson remains a powerful icon today. It is clear that he would urge Americans to create relationships beyond their borders, demand that they uphold the ideals of democracy and equality, and challenge this generation to accept this torch as we approach the next century.

(Franklin 1998: 300)

Finally, two sport historians add strength to the case study of Paul Robeson as both a scholar and an athlete. Smith (1979) addresses the role model construct of black athletes in his article 'The Paul Robeson – Jackie Robinson Saga and a Political Collision', by analysing the tension in various communities and power structures. Opinions expressed by blacks were not consistent and there was a negative climate around Robeson's name, a division among blacks over two of their heroes and a feeling of disappointment with Robinson 'selling out' in the eyes of some (Smith 1979). This good negro–bad negro binary is present today with the likes of Michael Jordan versus Michael Tyson, Allen Iverson versus Tiger Woods, etc. Sammons (1994) affirms our case study analysis of Robeson as an early pioneer, African American scholar and athlete:

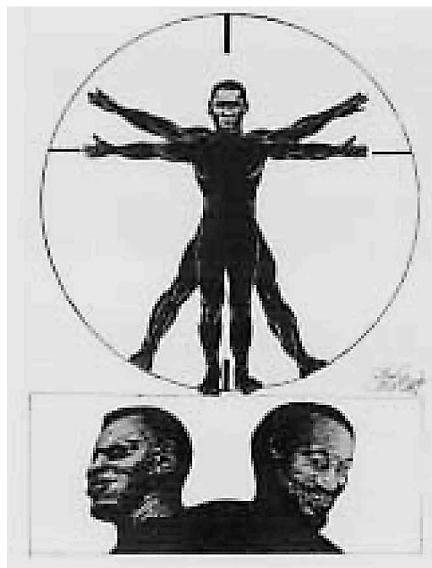


Figure 4 Examining the socialization patterns of early African-American male student-athletes like Paul Robeson will give us more answers today. Courtesy of The Paul Robeson Center. Artist: Bostic.

Sport historians must not just follow and remain behind the curve, using superficial understandings and examples of the latest theory or approach to seem current and fluent. Sport history can lead the way and change directions in important areas such as integration, gender, and violence to name a few. The last two should be of particular interest to women scholars, whose association with sport history has been virtually non-existent. To take advantage of the opportunity to progress, old ways of thinking must be shed. The framework has been laid, a rich body of material has been mined, now is the time for taking risks, becoming adventurous. If we do not, we will only keep talking to and among ourselves.

(Sammons 1994: 278)

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the importance of Robeson's legacy as both a scholar and an athlete. Considering Sammons' call for considering new directions when considering integration and gender, Paul Robeson leaves us with several thoughts to consider in terms of the broader social context. See Figure 4. One might infer that Robeson's political actions began as he fought for respect on and off the field at Rutgers University. This identity would grow as Robeson matured throughout his life. This identity also complimented (conservative) and contradicted (radical) prior feelings from his

valedictorian speech, 'The New Idealism' from *The Daily Targum*: 'We know that neither institutions nor friends can make a race stand unless it has strength in its own foundation; that races like individuals must stand or fall by their own merit; that to fully succeed they must practice their virtues of self-reliance, self-respect, industry, perseverance and economy' (1991: 571) Robeson would later be demonized because of his support of communist ideology and his artistic talents in the music and drama industry were stunted by this action. The context of today's African-American male student-athlete and professional athlete has no idea of the overt racism Robeson faced. It should be noted that Robeson travelled the world and embraced other cultures not only because of his humanistic qualities, but also because of the various countries' ideologies and embracing of his masculinity and vision. Today's African-American athlete is rarely political because of people like Robeson bringing down the barriers and walls of simple access – access to a few sports is more than a reality for the African-American male athlete. This presents a problem when only half of Robeson's image is modelled (the athlete). As Wiggins articulated previously, there are some benefits to the athletic experience with minimal development intellectually.

Robeson's human agency in the twenty-first century continues to be political and challenges the overt and covert forms of racism in sports: academic fraud, exploitation, discrimination and stereotypes to name a few. Most of today's 'ballers' do not challenge these ills because the political landscape and ecology of the student-athlete experience is less physically volatile and economically profitable (for a selected few). The battle in the twenty-first century will be fought more in the classroom and in the textbooks than on the field. Robeson is the ultimate gauge for any student-athlete, male or female, black, white or brown. Examining data by the NCAA (1995) cited in Sellers (2000), scholars on race and sport should note the following:

The problem of the relatively poor performance of African American student-athletes is not one of focusing too much on athletics. In fact, their athletic achievement may actually have provided them with an educational opportunity that would not have otherwise existed if they were not athletes. This is witnessed by the fact that roughly 1 out of 9 African American males on Division I campuses are scholarship athletes, as compared to a ratio of 1 out of 50 for White Males (NCAA, 1995). In reality, the African American student-athlete is the only connection between the post-secondary school system and the problems of the inner-city educational system.

(2000: 146)

Sellers also cautions researchers to understand that African-American student-athletes are a heterogeneous group. A multitude of variables should be studied and documented in the literature of sport sociology, sport history

and sport social psychology. 'Thus, the postathletic career adjustment of African American student-athletes is a topic worthy of study, in itself, without other comparison groups to provide texture' (Sellers 2000: 148). This validates our perspective that Paul Robeson is the quintessential case study for African-American male student-athletes. However, Robeson should not be viewed as the exception to the rule or an aberration historically. Icons such as Charles Drew (Amherst), Jerome 'Brud' Holland (Cornell), William Henry Lewis (Amherst, Harvard) and Duke Slater (Iowa) were all 'scholar-ballers' and early pioneers of the student-athlete experience. It was often the case that they were the only people of colour on their respective campuses – much different from the landscape today in American higher education. African-American student-athletes were highly selected versus the surplus of African-American males institutionally embraced in the major revenue sports of football and basketball.

Future studies and papers such as ours should examine the plight of early black female scholar-athletes, other ethnic groups, and more connection of these histories should be linked and tied to current issues of education, race and sport. The more connection of the present to the past, the more textual and inclusive to other disciplines (Borish 1999; Sammons 1994), the richer and more stimulating sport history will be.

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130 C. Keith Harrison and Brian Lampman

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