



THE RACE TO SUCCESS

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The stereotype that African-Americans are comparatively better athletes has evolved into part of the sports culture within the U.S. West Side Story reflects on the possible causes and implications this stereotype has on participation in sports.

Gabe Caruthers '19 had just finished a few seconds ahead of a competitor in the 200m dash at Wartburg College his freshman year in high school when his opponent said, "It's because you're black."

"Before the race started, this kid that I was up against told me that he was going to win," Caruthers said. "I then finished [ahead] of him and he just looked at me and then said that." Whether or not he was joking, Caruthers wasn't sure.

Caruthers used to love racing his friends at the playground in elementary school and knew he had natural ability. But as the years passed, it annoyed him that people assumed his ability equated to his mixed race.

"I was always like, 'No, not all black people are fast, that's not how it works,'" Caruthers said. "As I got older, though, I realized that the only people who say that to you are the people that you're faster than, so it's just a way to bring you down."

According to Dante Eldridge '19, many echo the stereotype that African-Americans can run

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faster and jump higher so often that it's unconsciously interpreted to be a correct statement.

This stereotype is perhaps perpetuated by reports from The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports that found 69.7 percent of NFL players were African-American as opposed to 27.4 percent white. This comparatively higher participation rate of blacks was also reported in the NBA and WNBA.

The belief that African-Americans are comparatively better athletes may have begun with barrier-breaking athletes like Jackie Robinson,

according to Rachael Saunders '18.

"If you look back in history to Jackie Robinson, the first African-American in Major League Baseball," Saunders said. "His success in the major leagues opened the door for other African-American players."

Saunders noted that in addition to Robinson's legendary career, his background may have also played a role in the 'It's because you're black' stereotype.

"Maybe some people [when hearing about Jackie Robinson's background] equate growing up in the slums, in poverty, and being tough and fast, to influencing athletic ability," Saunders said.

Diane Williams, a doctoral student in American Studies and Sport Studies at the University of Iowa, outlined possible cultural influences that caused people of color to participate in specific sports.

"When it comes to sports and race, participation rates are often related to histories of access and resources: who has access to what sports, and who has the resources to participate," Williams said. "Access can mean a lot of things—who is welcomed, allowed to play, in charge, who has familiarity with the sport and who has role models that look like them that have played the sport."

Before schools were integrated in 1954, African-American students had comparatively limited sports opportunities but were able to play football, basketball and track, partly because these sports required less equipment and were more affordable at the time. All-white schools with more funding allowed students to play sports like swimming, tennis and golf, where facilities required payment for use. Following integration, African-Americans tended to participate in the sports that they were already familiar with: track, football and basketball.

This significant separation of race among sports may contribute to the high percentage of black athletes on rosters today, particularly in football and basketball.

Saunders has noticed this separation regarding which sports different races compete in.

"I don't know why, but it's interesting to see, for example, a more dominant Caucasian population swimming. This, as opposed to the current basketball teams, which are dominantly African-American," Saunders said. "I've definitely heard comments in basketball tournaments about a team being good because they have a more populated team of African-Americans or people of color."

Williams noted that stereotypes about African-Americans' physical abilities may have emerged to rationalize unequal access and resulting disparities.

"In the case of African-American communities and swimming, for example, state-sanctioned segregation contributed to the limited access to public pools and swimming lessons, leading to higher drowning rates for African-American children and stereotypes about African-Americans' abilities, based in racist assumptions and disproven science, that still exist," Williams said.

Saunders pointed out that deciding to play a sport that doesn't require the use of facilities may have more to do with proximity rather than a family's income.

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She also noted that family members' legacies influence what sport their child decides to participate in, acknowledging that her decisions are perhaps a byproduct of her parents' background in athletics.

"My mom was a swimmer, so I swam when I was younger. Then I started playing basketball because my dad played basketball. So maybe it was just familiarity, parents putting their children into sports that they did," Saunders said.

In a 2016-2017 report, the Iowa Department of Education Bureau of Information and Analysis found that of the total 7,154 male athletes PreK-12 in Iowa City, 1,398 were black and 4,091 were white.

Although this may indicate a reversal from the higher participation of blacks in sports, Saunders believes that different sports are popular in different regions and that the heavier percentage of both male and female white athletes in Iowa City has more to do with where certain demographic populations are concentrated geographically. Iowa City contrasts with major metropolitan areas, like Chicago, in this regard.

While it's still present, Caruthers acknowledges that the "it's because you're black" stereotype has perhaps lost some of its impact as it worked its way into the culture.

"It's evolved into more of a joke and something that everybody's become numb to," Caruthers said. "The idea that black people are good at this [or that] sport has become an [unconscious parameter] for what sport kids should get involved in, in an unspoken 'do this, don't do that' way."