



**HAL**  
open science

# The Great Migrations and the Emergence of an African American Olympic Elite

François-René Julliard

► **To cite this version:**

François-René Julliard. The Great Migrations and the Emergence of an African American Olympic Elite. Experiences of African American Mobility since the Civil Rights Movement, Sarah Harakat; Nicolas Raulin, May 2021, Paris sorbonne, France. hal-04863635

**HAL Id: hal-04863635**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04863635v1>**

Submitted on 4 Jan 2025

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Experiences of African American Mobility since the Civil Rights Movement

May 6th 2022 – Maison de la Recherche de la Sorbonne

## « The Great Migrations and the Emergence of an African American Olympic Elite »

### Introduction

In this presentation, I propose to show how the major African-American migrations of the twentieth century can be linked to the emergence of an African-American sports elite. Here, I will focus more specifically on Olympic athletes. The choice of talking about Olympic athletes is not accidental: unlike segregated professional sports, the Olympic Games are theoretically open to all athletes, male at least. This makes it possible to measure the weight taken by the black athletes within a mixed delegation.

The link between migration and African-American sports elites generally goes unnoticed. **However, it is not anecdotal.** Indeed, since the 1930s, the performances of black American Olympic athletes have given rise to debates on the reasons for this excellence, particularly in track and field, sprints and jumps. In the interpretations given, there is often a naturalist or essentialist temptation: African-American athletes run faster and jump farther because they are naturally made for these activities. Their bodies are different, closer to nature according to some. For example, **Dean Cromwell**, head coach of the 1936 Olympic track and field team, says that the black athlete excels because he is "closer to the primitive man" than the white man. I quote: "It was not so long ago that his ability to run fast and jump was a matter of life and death in the jungle."

Showing that geographic migration has played a role in these performances is to contribute to the fight against such stereotypes, by giving more sociological explanations. These migrations have in fact allowed athletes to access **universities in the North**, which have better facilities, allowing for better sports preparation. The historiography emphasizes the role of the universities, but not that of the migrations, although one depends on the other. The role of migration to the North is sometimes suggested more in autobiographies of athletes, but **this does not lead to generalizations.**

My plan is not entirely faithful to the constraints set by the workshop, as my first part will focus on the 1930s, with the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics and the 1936 Berlin Games, where African American male athletes really come to the fore. In the second part, I will talk about the place of California, which attracts the best athletes after the war and until today. Finally, in the third and last part, I will discuss the case of Black American women athletes, who for specific reasons have not experienced the same migration dynamics. I will rely on the presentation of some representative athletes' trajectories.

## l) Pre-war: the formation of an African-American Olympic elite

From 1896, date of the first modern Olympic Games created by Pierre de Coubertin, until 1932, some black American athletes participated in the Games, and won medals. In the Games of 1932 and especially 1936, their presence in the American Olympic team increased. During the first eight editions, only nine athletes participated in the Games. In Los Angeles, they are six, and in Berlin, they are eighteen, including two women. Their performances also improve in a spectacular way. 6 medals during the first 8 editions, 13 medals in Berlin, with a strong presence in sprint and jumping.

How can this be explained? Some explain it, as I said, by the nature of black bodies, which are supposed to be naturally gifted for speed sports. Others have made more sociological analyses. Often, however, these analyses forget the role of migration. Many athletes were born in the segregated rural South. During the **first Great Migration**, starting around the First World War, their families often moved to the industrial metropolises of the Northeast and Midwest such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, or to the Harlem area. Thus, the athletes belonged very often to the second generation, having grown up a little in the South and then moved away.

This is the case of the famous **Jesse Owens**, who won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics. He was born in Alabama, in a very rural and isolated place. His father was a sharecropper, his mother was a maid. Shortly after World War I, his family moved to the industrial city of Cleveland when Jesse was still a child. In his autobiography, Owens tells of asking his mother where the train was going to take them. She replied, "It will take us to a better life". This type of trajectory is obviously not exceptional, but rather very typical. In Cleveland, Owens' father became a laborer, and like many of these migrants, he struggled to find steady work. His mother continued to work as a maid for white employers

But for the young Jesse Owens, migrating to the North had one essential consequence: it offered the possibility of being spotted by a white university, richer than the black universities of the South, the **HBCUs** (Historically black colleges and universities). Northern universities usually have a male athletic program and can offer athletic scholarships to top athletes. This is what happened to Owens, who received many offers and finally chose to go to **Ohio State University**. There, he could take advantage of better facilities, a real track, the help of certified coaches, and the competition with white athletes.

Access to northern universities is thus the key to linking migration and performance at the Olympics. Given the place of universities in American sport, this considerably strengthens the chances of being able to practice sport at the highest level for African American athletes. The generation whose parents had arrived in the industrial North in the 1910s and 1920s came of age at the time of the 1930s Games. Hence, their presence and performance increased.

Before the Second World War, the black athletes already appear as an important asset for the American team. This will be confirmed after the war. As could be expected from the dynamics

of the Second Great Migration, a new region will become preponderant for the emergence of black American talents: **California**.

## II) Post-war: California, the new promised land

After the Second World War, the Olympics take back with difficulty: they are the 1948 Games in London. These Games take place in a city still in reconstruction, where the German bombardments made important damages. Four years later, the Games of Helsinki mark a turning point and a change of time: the USSR takes part for the first time in the Games, whereas it had until now considered that the Olympic Games were a bourgeois institution, in the opposite of the communist values. The Games of Helsinki thus mark the entry in the cold war from the sporting point of view. It is the beginning of the confrontations between Americans and Soviets, the beginning of a fight for the supremacy.

This has the effect of reinforcing the symbolic value of the Games in the eyes of the Americans, and therefore the value of their athletes. The American government is going to be more and more concerned with the sports training. Nevertheless, the central institution of training of the athletes remains the university, private or public. But the geography of the universities that train the best athletes gradually evolves, to the benefit of the universities of the West, especially the Californian universities. Athletes follow the more general pattern of the Second Migration, during which many African Americans migrated to California, considered as a more tolerant and economically expanding Promised Land.

We find the same process as in the first half of the century: the athletes are the descendants of parents who move to the West. They are second-generation Californians. Or the athletes are not Californians but get an advantageous athletic scholarship that entices them to come to California.

There are **two specific factors** that may explain the appeal of California:

- 1) **weather conditions**. It is of course more pleasant and easier to train in any season in a very sunny area.
- 2) An **athletic tradition** that was established after the war in certain universities, such as the two major universities in Los Angeles, UCLA and the University of Southern California (USC).

I would like to rely on two examples of California universities that were breeding grounds for black Olympic champions. The first is **UCLA**. It illustrates very well the notion of a sporting tradition. This university is notably known for having hosted a famous athlete, **Jackie Robinson**, who was the first African-American baseball player to play in Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1947. Robinson's subsequent symbolism as the first to break the color line helped to reinforce UCLA's reputation as a university open to black athletes and supportive of performance. Other line-breakers have come through UCLA, such as **Kenny Washington**, the first black player to play in the National Football League (NFL), the major American soccer league.

These famous names can influence talented young athletes who are offered multiple scholarships from numerous universities. This was the case for Rafer Johnson, the future Olympic decathlon champion in 1960. He hesitated but eventually chose UCLA. In his autobiography, he writes that one of the reasons he chose UCLA was because it was Jackie Robinson's university. Another example of an Olympic champion who came through UCLA is **Don Barksdale**, the first African-American basketball player to make the Olympic team in 1948.

The second case I would like to develop is that of **San Jose State College**, which is now called San Jose State University. This university developed a track and field program beginning in the late 1950s. The reputation of the coach, Bud Winter, grew, and successes came, especially in sprinting, so that in the 1960s, San Jose was nicknamed "**Speed City**". Among the champions there, two would become famous: **Tommie Smith and John Carlos**, who in 1968 will raise their fist on the podium of the 200 meters at the Mexico City Olympics and be excluded from the Games. The social and geographical profile of Smith and Carlos illustrates perfectly two different cases. Tommie Smith is the son of a farm worker who migrated from Texas to California, and settled in Fresno, in the fertile San Joaquin Valley. Smith was born in Texas but spent most of his childhood in California. So he belongs to the second generation. Carlos has a very different profile: he also belongs to the working class (his father was a shoe manufacturer), but he grew up in Harlem and came to California only because he was offered an athletic scholarship.

However, it should be noted that migration is highly dependent on the financial means of the universities that are able to attract athletes. In the long run, the wealthiest universities are more likely to continue to attract the best. Thus UCLA has remained a dominant sports university until today, but San Jose is a smaller university with more modest means. It declined from the 1970s onwards.

Even today, thanks to its universities, California is an Olympic power in its own right, and it owes this in part to its African-American athletes, since the Second Great Migration.

### III) Olympic sportswomen, deferred migrations

However, and this will be my last part, we must distinguish between two migratory logics, that of men and that of women. For **African-American female athletes**, the logic is different. For a long time, we do not observe, as with men, migration towards the North or the West. On the contrary, we observe migration towards the South! How can this be explained? Few universities had a women's sports program before the 1970s. This low level of development can be explained in large part by the mistrust associated with women's sports for a very long time. The practice of sport was accused of threatening femininity, a femininity defined according to "Victorian" criteria of fragility and delicacy.

This mistrust was multiplied tenfold when it was a question of sport practiced for competition. In the case of track and field, there was no competitive women's college program until the

1920s. And it was black universities in the South that were pioneers in this area. The first university to create one was a black university, the **Tuskegee Institute** in Alabama. It was joined in the 1950s by **Tennessee State College**, now called Tennessee State University. This university produced a great line of African American champions, the most famous of which is certainly **Wilma Rudolph**, who won 3 gold medals in Rome in 1960. This meant that if you wanted to prepare for the Olympics, you had to go or stay in the South. For a long time, these black universities in the South maintained a kind of monopoly. So we see completely different and opposite migrations from those of men.

However, a big change came later, in 1972, with the enactment of **Title IX**. This amendment prohibits gender-based discrimination in state-funded education programs. This includes sports programs.

This changed the situation. Now, the law requires a significant investment in women's sports. Soon, every university in the country had competitive sports programs. The black universities in the South lost their monopoly and faced hard competition. The wealthiest universities were able to attract the best female athletes, black or white. Tennessee State University, despite its track and field tradition, is finding it hard to resist. On the contrary, California universities attracted many future Olympic champions. This migration to the West is in a clear time lag compared to the male athletes, since it takes place in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1960, of the 12 African-American women athletes participating in the Olympics, 10 belonged to a black university in the South. None came from California. In 1984, at the Los Angeles Olympics, of the 34 African-American athletes, 14 were from California, and only 12 were from a Southern university. In track and field, the change is particularly clear: the best sprinters in the world, **Florence Griffith Joyner**, **Evelyn Ashford**, **Valerie Brisco-Hooks**, the **heptathlete Jackie Joyner-Kersey**, all trained in California.

## Conclusion

I will make two remarks in conclusion:

1) We can see that the African American Olympic athletes, at least the men, also experienced general migratory movements, and that the logics of the first and second Great Migration can be applied to them. The case of women, however, shows that other factors may be at stake. **Crossing racial and gender issues** allows us to make the picture more complex.

2) My second remark also goes in the direction of **complexity**. For a long time, migration could be explained by the difference between universities that had an sport program, and universities that had not. But progressively, all universities opened sports programs. University sports, the stage that can open the doors of the Olympics, has become an **open market** in which athletes are attracted with financial arguments. Of course, other factors can come into play: we see that California benefits from its sunshine and its reputation for tolerance. But fundamentally, it is increasingly difficult to model the migration of young sports talents. There is also remigration to the South. A successful coach, or a sports scholarship with interesting conditions, can

convince athletes. The current geography is therefore complex, far from the monopolies of the past, and one should not schematize.