

The Athlete as Trickster

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This study invokes hegemony theory to analyze the role and uses of sport as a means to resist dominant group pressures and the adaptation of sporting practices to subordinate groups' needs. The study draws upon literary and anthropological works that support the role of the trickster as a resistive, even manipulative figure, who fulfills both instructive and psychological needs for particular subordinate groups.

It pays particular attention to subtle, symbolic, and surreptitious interactions between subordinate group athletes and their dominant group opponents or audiences. The practices of three groups largely identified with cultural transmission via oral storytelling and the trickster figure (i.e. Native Americans, African Americans, and Irish Americans) are presented as evidence of fulfillment of the role of the trickster.

The trickster, a prominent character in literary folk tales and anthropological studies, often appeared as devious, comical, or foolish yet served a vital role by instructing others in the more subtle techniques of coping with a prescribed status.

Usually representative of a subordinate group, the trickster managed to reverse or manipulate the customary power relationships. The trickster subverted such roles by wit or deception sometimes mocking or foiling authority, even casting a superior as the butt of a joke or as a fool. In so doing the trickster provided a psychological escape from oppression.¹

Folk tales of tricksters, often transmitted orally by storytellers, not only entertained but enlightened listeners, providing them with one means to manage anger, frustration, and suppression. Among native Americans the coyote tales served such a purpose, while African-Americans learned from the exploits of Brer Rabbit.² One black song reflected the duality of African-American lives by stating:

“Got one mind for white folks to see,
 ‘Nother for what I know is me;
 he don’t know, he don’t know my mind.”³

One such storyteller, James Douglas Suggs, born in Mississippi in 1887, also played professional baseball throughout the South, and it is the intent of this study to examine the role of sport as a site for tricksters to ply their trade. Like literature and art but along with music, more accessible to and pervasive in popular culture, sport provided a means of resistance and rebellion that muted the effects of oppression and subordination.⁴

The lack of political or economic power among secondary groups necessitated the trickster. Lawrence Levine in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* stated that “‘Beating the white man at his own game’ was often a powerful motivator for achievement among Negroes in the period between the first and second world wars.”⁵ Writers of the Harlem Renaissance extolled the trickster in both literature and music. Charles Keil, in his study of the urban blues, claimed that the art of the “put on” had already been highly developed in black culture by that time.⁶

Non-whites held no monopoly on tricksterism, for anyone who perceived themselves in an inferior role might invoke the ploy. Amos Alonzo Stagg, as coach of the upstart University of Chicago team, devised a host of trick plays for use against regional rivals and the eastern powers that dominated both football and culture before World War I. In the first Army-Navy

game of 1890 the former protested the latter's 24-0 victory because Army deemed Navy's use of fakes to be ungentlemanly and dishonorable.⁷

White pretensions to moral, physical, and intellectual superiority under the guise of Social Darwinism, only benefited the non-white trickster. The Carlisle Indians team outwitted their white opponents in a variety of ways. Considered unfit for citizenship until 1924, the Indian tricksters found the means to validate their own self-esteem. Although the United States government perceived the Carlisle football team as a showcase for its assimilation efforts, the Indians sometimes had ulterior motives. Carlisle nearly defeated mighty Harvard in 1903 by hiding the ball under a player's jersey. Two years later Carlisle flaunted their own superiority in response to whites' racism. When Dickinson's pre-game festivities included a cowboy scalping an Indian, Carlisle produced a Dickinson dummy and filled it with arrows after each of its scores in a 36-0 rout, thus defying whites' supposed superiority. In 1911 when Syracuse players broke the nose of a Carlisle guard they were amazed at his return. Under a mask of bandages the supposedly injured warrior inflicted a great measure of revenge throughout the remainder of the game. Only in the post-game locker room did the Syracuse captain spy Emil Hauser, Carlisle's assistant coach, under the tape. In another contest with Syracuse the Carlisle team sewed imitation leather footballs on their jerseys to confuse opposing tacklers.⁸

The native Americans took a particular pride in defeating the Army team, the symbol of white domination; and got great joy when they outsmarted elite, white institutions. They managed a 1907 win over the University of Chicago when Albert Exendine ran off the field, around the opponents' bench, and returned to catch a touchdown pass, technically circumventing the rule that disallowed a catch (but not a player) out of bounds. After a Carlisle win over Harvard the Indians mocked the bluebloods' Cambridge accents, "even those with very little English attempting the broad A." After a win over Penn, a Carlisle player surmised, "Maybe white men better with cannon and guns, but Indian just as good in brains to think with."⁹

The Indians continued to outwit white fans and at least one entrepreneur after their collegiate days. Walter Lingo, an Ohio

dog breeder, sponsored an all-Indian team in the National Football League in 1922. Representing twelve different tribes and led by Jim Thorpe, considered the world's greatest athlete after his Olympic victories and the professional circuit's premier player, the team toured the country at Lingo's expense. Fans flocked to see the novelty team, the great Thorpe, and the half-time exhibition of "Indian" activities, including bear wrestling. Leon Boutwell, one of the players, explained

White people had this misconception about Indians. They thought they were all wild men, even though almost all of us had been to college and were generally more civilized than they were. Well, it was a dandy excuse to raise hell and get away with it when the mood struck us. Since we were Indians we would get away with things the whites couldn't. Don't think we didn't take advantage of it.

Consequently, the Indians partied hard but expended little energy on the field. Thorpe played sparingly and the team won only four NFL contests in its two year existence, failing to score in most games, and often losing by astronomical scores. Lingo had been duped, the tricksters had won, and after the 1923 season they moved on, selling their skills to other teams.¹⁰

Black barnstormers, too, played the fool ostensibly to entertain largely white audiences but also taking their money in the process. By the 1920s black basketball teams had developed a fast, deceptive style of play that bewildered opponents and amazed spectators.¹¹ Perhaps the most well-known of such teams, the Harlem Globetrotters, actually started as a Chicago team. They ventured into Wisconsin in 1927, falsely advertising themselves as college stars. A coach masqueraded as Sol Butler, who had held the world record in the long jump, and the unwary Wisconsin burghers gladly offered their money to watch the impostors, whose play, at least, matched their guile.¹² Future Globetrotter teams expanded upon the fool's role, feigning the stereotypical clown but making whites pay for their laughs, usually at the expense of white opponents or authority figures in the form of referees.

Baseball features a multitude of tricksters but one in particular, Mike "King" Kelly, captured the hearts of fans during the 1880s. Teammate Fred Pfeffer claimed that Kelly "played

the umpire as intelligently as he did the opposing nine," befriending and endearing himself to the referee in order to win his favor.¹³ As a baserunner Kelly then took advantage of the distracted umpire, saving valuable steps by cutting the corners on his way around the bags. When catching he impeded opponents by throwing his mask in their path or simply grabbing their belt loops. On one occasion, too hungover to start the game, Kelly languished in the dugout until a pop fly was hit his way. Noticing that his teammates could not make the catch, he jumped up and announced himself as a substitute for the catcher, then made the putout. Another time he patrolled right field in the hazy dusk. When the batter hit a deep fly over his head Kelly ran back, leaped into the air, and out of the dim mist, threw the ball back as the umpire signaled an out. In the dugout his teammates congratulated him on his remarkable feat which he dismissed by admitting that the hit flew a mile over his head; but he had a spare ball in his pocket.¹⁴

Kelly's antics endeared him to fans and teammates but his drinking alarmed team owners, eventually causing his sale from Chicago to Boston whose fans embraced him with lavish gifts. Nevertheless Kelly enjoyed a superstar status and salary, proving that a working class Irish-American could beat the establishment on his own terms as a trickster. Such defiant figures served as role models and heroes to those who struggled with the throes of capitalist industrialization and nativist bigotry.

Unable to entice white umpires, black barnstormers developed more subtle tricks to defeat antagonists. Arthur Hardy, who pitched for both the Topeka and Chicago Giants between 1905-1912, indicated that the team worked Kansas towns in pre-game festivities, playing to stereotypes and avoiding racist backlash from whites. They kept games close and even lost on occasion in order to up the stakes for their return trip, and in subsequent matches or the post-game carnival activities the African-Americans got "all the whites' money."¹⁵

Rube Foster, Hardy's boss on the Chicago Giants, tricked opponents' batters by using cold balls and wetting down the infield to limit their productivity. Other pitchers, like the legendary Satchel Paige, had a repertoire of trick pitches to fool hitters. Upon his late arrival to the major leagues, Paige's mys-

terious “hesitation” pitch proved so effective that the commissioner banned it. Competing against Paige’s barnstorming all-star team, one Chicago semi-pro pitcher tried to thwart his opponents by cutting the ball. The result, usually achieved with a wedding ring or a hidden emery board, caused the pitch to travel in unknown and unexpected directions. The move backfired when Paige informed the Chicagoans that he had to use the same projectile and his overwhelming fast ball could literally prove deadly to any batter who attempted to dig in.¹⁶

Against white teams Paige’s eccentric pitches and clowning appeared to some as a “minstrel show on the mound” but he could assume the role of the defiant trickster when provoked.¹⁷ When Long John Tucker, a member of the House of David team, swore at and threatened Paige’s catcher, the next pitch resulted in two broken ribs. Willie Wells, shortstop for the Winnipeg Buffaloes, got his revenge by loading the fingertips of his glove with rocks and tagging opponents in the head as they slid into second base.¹⁸

Veteran black players used the game to enlighten younger African-Americans as well. Frazier Robinson reiterated an account of a barnstorming trip through Northeast Texas where a team of young blacks who considered themselves the regional champions issued a challenge. Despite the barnstormers’ victory the young upstarts insisted on a rematch with a wealthy white backer expecting windfall profits for the local team. Robinson’s team humiliated the Texans, 17-0, taking their money and their pride.¹⁹

Tricksters were not confined to subordinate ranks, however. Bill Veeck, the maverick owner of baseball teams and horseracing tracks, enjoyed wealth, fame, and the love of his fans if not his fellow owners who felt that his promotions made a farce of the game. As owner of the St. Louis Browns, Cleveland Indians, and Chicago White Sox Veeck turned fledgling franchises into winners and set attendance records along the way. He brought the aging Satchel Paige into the major leagues and once sent a midget, Eddie Gaedel, to bat. When Cleveland failed miserably he held a public funeral and buried the pennant in center field. Still, fans came to the park to enjoy the raffles and prizes offered. On one such occasion the winner gained a truckload of fertilizer; on another Veeck tricked the

recipient who received 500 white tuxedos, all rented for the same date. When the fan turned the table by inviting 499 friends to the ballgame on that particular day, all dressed in their finery, Veeck graciously bought beer for the entire group. Veeck's trickery, hucksterism, and showmanship offended baseball's elites but endeared him to the masses who appreciated his snubs to snobbishness.²⁰

The physicality and brutality of boxing left little room for snobs but provided a national showcase for defiant tricksters. Among the most notable, Jack Johnson engaged in fake fights to reach the top, ridiculed his white opponents, and scoffed at miscegenation laws. His attainment of the world championship overturned faulty perceptions of white superiority. Johnson's ostentatious display of wealth circumvented the established social order, and his evasion of federal authorities, for a time, mocked it. Like a true trickster, Johnson left some mystery about the fight that returned Jess Willard, the last of the Great White Hopes who challenged him, to the heavyweight throne.²¹

Johnson contended that he threw the fight for a large payoff, and while many analysts disagree, contemporary observers felt bewildered. Bat Masterson, who saw the bout, reported it as "a puzzle to fans" as Johnson looked strong for twenty rounds, then eyed his wife, the supposed recipient of the bribe money, after the twenty-third round, before suffering a knockout in the twenty-fifth. Another sportswriter claimed that the champion "punched and pounded Willard at will" for twenty rounds, then proved "unable or unwilling to go on." Both Johnson's sister and ballplayers who had visited him at his training camp maintained that the fight had been fixed.²² Even in defeat, or perhaps because of it, the proud trickster cast doubt. Like the defiant folk hero of the downtrodden, he had upset white notions of race and morality.

In the 1960s Muhammad Ali reincarnated the spirit of Jack Johnson as the defiant folk hero but elements of the trickster remained. Like Johnson he challenged the established order and avoided incarceration. He won with guile, speed, and deceptive footwork but the Ali shuffle no longer represented any sign of deference to whites. Conversely, Ali introduced the black oral culture that had sustained the trickster tales to white audiences. The ritual of insult, humor, and oratory assumed

the status of verbal combat directed at opponents and white society. To some he appeared blustery, boisterous, and often foolish; but like the trickster, he convinced Sonny Liston that he was crazy, enabling Ali to defeat the seemingly invincible champion. Years later, when his magnificent skills had waned, Ali tricked George Foreman with his rope-a-dope strategy to regain the heavyweight crown. Like Mike “King” Kelly, Ali forced the established authority to accept him on his own terms, using sport as contested political ground and proving that the trickster could be an active agent of change.²³

Athletes, as tricksters, thus served a vital function for subordinate groups. Sport provided not only a means for expression but tricksters represented a means of coping with repression and even, at times, a medium of retaliation, allowing the inversion of the traditional power relationships. In this sense, sport, like the folk tales of popular culture, not only entertained but enlightened succeeding generations.

Endnotes

¹ See Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), on power relationships; Catherine Peck, *A Treasury of North American Folk Tales* (New York: Book of the Month Club, 1998), 203-253; and Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops: Gambling in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 14-20, 68, 89, on the roles of tricksters.

² Peck, *A Treasury of North American Folk Tales*, 205-214; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 83, 102-121, 125-131; John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 18-44.

³ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, xiii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 344, 376, 389.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 438.

⁶ Robert L. Perry and Melvin T. Peters, “The African American Intellectual of the 1920s: Some Sociological Implications of the Harlem Renaissance,” *Ethnic Studies Review*, 19:2-3 (June/Oct. 1996), 155-172; Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: Univ. of

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Chicago Press, 1999 reprint of 1966 ed.), 12.

⁷ Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 191-193; Robin Lester, *Stagg's University: The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Big-Time Football at Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995), 102-104, 115-116; Gerald R. Gems, *For Pride, Profit, and Patriarchy: Football and the Incorporation of American Cultural Values* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), Gene Schoor, *100 Years of Army-Navy Football* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1989), 1-19.

⁸ Morris A. Bealle, *The History of Football at Harvard, 1874-1948* (Washington, D.C.: Columbia Pub. Co., 1948), 147; John S. Steckbeck, *Fabulous Redmen: The Carlisle Indians and Their Famous Football Teams* (Harrisburg, PA: J. Horace McFarland Co., 1951), 54-55, 65, 107.

⁹ Steckbeck, *Fabulous Redmen*, 110; Glenn S. Warner, "Heap Big Run-Most-Fast," *Collier's*, Oct. 24, 1931, 19, 46 (quotes.)

¹⁰ *Bulldogs on Sunday*, 1922 (Pro Football Researchers Assoc.), 15-22, (quote, 20-21); Bob Braunwart, Bob Carroll, and Joe Horrigan, "Oorang Indians," *Coffin Corner*, 3:1 (Jan. 1981), 1-8.

¹¹ *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 18, 1922, 10; Mar. 17, 1922, pt. 2:10.

¹² *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 14, 1931, 10; Feb. 20, 1932, 8; Jan. 21, 1933, 9.

¹³ Jonathan Fraser Light, *The Cultural Encyclopedia of Baseball* (Jefferson, NC; McFarland & Co., 1997), 400.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 140, 707, 765; Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 120-121; Daniel Okrent and Steve Wulf, *Baseball Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 16.

¹⁵ Mark Ribowsky, *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues, 1884 to 1955* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1955), 83-84; Donn Rogsin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues* (New York: Atheneum, 1983), 119 (quote.)

¹⁶ Frazier "Slow" Robinson with Paul Bauer, *Catching Dreams: My Life in the Negro Baseball Leagues* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 32, 43-45.

¹⁷ Benjamin G. Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 148.

¹⁸ Robinson with Bauer, *Catching Dreams*, 37-165.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 177-178.

²⁰ Light, *The Cultural Encyclopedia of Baseball*, 593.

²¹ Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983).

²² Newspaper clippings, *Boxing Scrapbooks*, vol. 14, Chicago Historical Society.

²³ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 344-358; Elliott J. Gorn, ed., *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 40-44, 66.