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Racism in American Sports History

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Abstract

Sport and racism are usually two matters that look like polar opposites, yet that attract each other relentlessly. One brings people and nations together regardless of their origins and beliefs; while the other sets them apart, resulting in conflicts, tension and a constant imbalance. Two metaphorical sides of a coin that reflects a passion and an issue in the World's greatest nation: the United States of America.

In this essay I will reflect on how racism and sports have gone hand-in-hand from the last two centuries until the current date. This will consist of an overview on how the interaction of these two matters has evolved through time, making emphasis on some key historical events, characters and on how it is perceived nowadays.

Keywords: *American, black, history, racism, sport, white.*

Resumen

Normalmente el deporte y el racismo son dos temas que parecen polos opuestos, pero que suelen acabar atrayéndose. Uno sirve como pegamento para unir a gente y naciones por igual, sin importar sus orígenes e ideales. El otro simplemente destruye estos vínculos, creando choques, tensiones y resultando en un conflicto constante. Dos caras de una misma moneda que ilustra metafóricamente por igual un problema y una pasión en la nación más grande del planeta: los Estados Unidos de América.

En este trabajo se analizará cómo estas dos temáticas han ido de la mano durante los dos últimos siglos. Esto se verá a través de un recorrido en el que se hará hincapié en eventos y personajes trascendentales en el trasfondo de la interacción entre el racismo y el deporte, al igual que la percepción actual de la misma.

Palabras clave: *americano, blanco, deporte, historia, negro, racismo.*

Index:

1. Introduction and general context of racism and segregation in the USA... 4

2. Racism in US Sports History – From
the American Civil War to the New Millenium. 14

 2.1 - 19th American sports – Segregation, Jim Crow laws
 and the Negro Leagues..... 14

 2.2 - The end of segregation, the Civil Rights Movement
 and the ascent of non-White athletes... 22

3. The 21st Century... 30

4. Conclusion... 33

5. Bibliography... 34

1. Introduction and General Context of Racism and Segregation in the USA.

Racism is defined as “policies, behaviours, rules, etc. that result in a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race” (Cambridge English Dictionary). The aim of this work will be to investigate and analyse the extent of this issue all throughout the history of American sport. This will range from the establishment of the very first iterations of the now-called National Leagues in the three major USA sport disciplines: basketball (NBA), football (NFL) and baseball (MLB), until the present day.

It is important to first establish some context on the country whose sports history will be the main subject of this thesis. The population in the US is mainly comprised of a mixture of five ethnicities: White, Black or African American, Asian, Native American/Indian and Pacific Islanders which includes Samoans, Hawaiians... (Statista, 2021). The total estimate of over 331 million inhabitants in the USA by this study shows that the USA population has increased by 49 million since the year 2000, where it was tallied at 282 million.

The growth in population as well as the co-existence of several different races within the same territory is bound to derive into a merge of cultures, which goes to show in the aforementioned study (Statista, 2021), as descendants from two or more races have increased from 3.96 million to 9.52 million in the last 20 years. This interaction has proven to be a factor that has positively affected the growth in population in the USA, but this interlinkage does not come without its downsides. Nowadays the amount of Whites who would move if they had a Black neighbor is under 1% of the people who were interviewed, while it was at 44% back in 1958 when a similar research was conducted. However, despite the fact that statistics like this one are common nowadays, instances of racism have still been present in the American society throughout this period.

It is suggested that racism has cost Black Americans around \$70 trillion since the start of slavery (Business Insider, 2020). The author of such article states that this instance of inequality has derived in a racial wealth gap which translates to Black American families owning just about a tenth of what White ones do in a \$17,150 to \$171,000 comparative. And it is not only in the economical spectrum where the inequalities between races do appear, as one of the most important chain of events derived in the world-wide phenomenon that is the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The origins of this movement are framed back in 2013 after three female Black activists launched such hashtag on *Twitter*, after George Zimmerman, a former Florida Police Officer was charged with the fatal shooting of an unarmed teenager named Tayvon Martin in 2012. The hashtag gained traction in 2014 at a national level when two more deaths similar to the case of Tayvon were reported in Missouri and New York (Howard University School of Law, 2023).

But the one event that made the BLM movement stand out the most and grow from a national issue to a problem regarded all around the world was the George Floyd incident. George Floyd was 46 when he was murdered by a police officer named Derek Chauvin who was 44 at the time in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25th 2020. The altercation ensued after Mr. Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill and the police was called upon the act. George Floyd was pinned to the ground and after emitting the famous sentence “I can’t breathe” (which would eventually become one of the mottos for the movement), was still restrained and with the knee of the officer against his neck for a period of over eight minutes where Floyd lost consciousness. Paramedics arrived at the scene seven minutes and 26 seconds after the initial pinning and Floyd would remain there for one minute and 20 seconds more before being let go, although in the end his life could not be saved. The eight minutes and 46 seconds would become a symbol in the future protests in 2020.

Moving onto the next ethnicity within the US territory, Latinos are the third largest group of citizens in the US, behind Whites and Blacks. The Latino population stood at 62.1 million individuals or 18.9% of the total population in the USA in 2022 U.S. (Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). Data from the 2019 census is shown in this article, breaking down the ethnicities of these individuals,

with Mexicans being the largest group by a considerable margin at 61.6%, followed by Puerto Ricans at 9.6% and Central Americans at 9.3%.

It was when the Mexican-American War ended, which lasted for two years between 1846 and 1848 that the annexation of a large part of Mexico by the USA and the discrimination towards the Mexicans living there began. These events were followed by eight decades of violence towards Mexicans, as mobs are held responsible for lynching 597 Mexicans from 1848 up to 1928, (Webb, Sussex Research Online Repository).

Mexicans suffered from segregation in many regards in the American society, as both children and adults were denied basic rights, such as education or a paid job, all due to their origins. Many were forced to establish in areas that were far from the core of the cities, as laws and policies from these territories and agencies enforced this form of segregation. This all extends to and peaks during the Great Depression (1929-1939), as many of these Mexican Americans were forced to return to their homeland against their will. It estimated that the total amount of Mexicans deported during that period is around 82,000.

Mexicans and Blacks endured racist comments and policies from US President Richard Nixon during the 1960s, as he labelled them as “dogs” or “dishonest”. This sentiment has remained present in the American society and was strongly enforced by US President Donald Trump during his stint in the White House (2017-2021). The 45th President of the US had always shown an Anti-Hispanic attitude, even prior to him reaching the Presidency of the USA. *Time* compiled all the instances where he publicly addressed Latinos in a pejorative manner, some of which included him calling them “rapists”, “enemies of our country” or insinuating that their court system is “corrupt”. As a result, after becoming US President, Trump renewed, rebuilt and expanded the physical wall along the US-Mexico border. This barrier began being constructed after the aforementioned Mexican-American War, but despite an all-time low statistic of illegal immigration in 2010, Trump launched several projects in order to lower these numbers. It is estimated that over 500 miles were rebuilt or built during Trump’s mandate (Rodgers and Dominic, BBC).

There are Hispanics facing a problem with racism that is not being addressed enough:

Latinos face racism from other Latinos. And the victims of such racist iterations claim it to be as frequent to suffer from racism from other Latinos as it is to suffer it from Whites. The Latinos who experience this problematic are those who have darker skin colour or come from certain countries, with Puerto Ricans being the ones to lead this statistic (Chavez, CNN; Noe-Bustamante, Pew Research Centre).

In 2022, 20% of Latinos claimed to have suffered segregation or received discriminatory comments due to their origin, skin colour or them speaking in Spanish during the previous year, according to the study conducted by CNN mentioned above. Out of the Hispanics who suffered from racism, 25% of them claimed that the individuals harassing them were fellow Latinos with lighter skin colour or born in the USA. This issue has been addressed and has been fought against by many famous Latin American figures in their respective fields. An example in the world of music is Marc Anthony with lyrics from his songs such as *La Gozadera* where he sang “si tú eres latino, saca tu bandera” (If you are Latino, bring out your flag); or wrestlers like Rey Mysterio and Santos Escobar who cooperated with other Latino wrestlers as a stable under the name Latino World Order (LWO), who even paired up with pop-culture Hispanic referents like Bad Bunny at their show *Backlash* in Puerto Rico in June 2023.

Racism does not only extend to Blacks and Latinos, as it is a problem that affects all races. People of Asian origins have been subject to racism and segregation in the USA. Despite having grown from 10.7 million to almost double that amount at 20.1 million Asians in the USA during the last 20 years, this induction of Asians into the American population has not always been easy, as Asians have suffered from racism and violence as well as social isolation for large portions of their stint in the USA.

The start of this conflict is placed in history near the 1790's where *The Naturalization Act* was passed and the citizenship by naturalisation only applied to “free White person(s) of good character”, right after the first waves of Chinese immigrants arrived in the USA. After that, the Industrial Revolution in the US was a prosperous period where Asians were frequently used to build railroads. This resulted in even more

immigration from Chinese individuals, who worked for very low wages. This situation ended up escalating to a point where the term *Yellow Peril* became widespread. Abigail Angell explains in an article for *Study* that “the increase in global relations, colonialism, white supremacy and technological advancement displacing workers led to a rising paranoia toward outside cultures. [...] Eastern world’s drastically different customs and dress became a scapegoat for Western xenophobia. This anxiety and paranoia came to be known as The Yellow Peril”, according to an article by Taylor Weik, a journalist for *Fox News*.

The Chinese Massacre of 1871 is an event that ensued after a shootout between two rival Chinese Huiguan (“series of guildhalls established by regional organisations (tongxiang hui) in different areas” following information (Britannica)) leaders in Los Angeles, California. (Wallace, Los Angeles Public Library Blog) explains that after the shooting and wounding of a police officer and killing of a well-known saloon owner, the Chinese who had taken part in the altercation barricaded themselves to no avail after almost 10% of Los Angeles’ population at the time gathered to force them out of the building they were in and publicly lynched them by hanging and shooting them near the city’s jail yard. In total there were 18 Chinese victims that night and only one is believed to have participated in the original shooting. These 18 individuals constituted more than 10% of the Chinese population in Los Angeles in 1871 (18 out of 172).

Former events did not lead to more open-minded approaches towards Asians, but into increased xenophobia. This transpired at all levels, as associations like the *Anti-Coolie Club* were formed, publications like newspapers became platforms used to attack the Asians, riots like the ones in San Francisco in 1877 or Denver 1880 as well as the approval of laws or official documents that were harmful towards Asians, such as the *1879 Constitution of the State of California* or the *1882 Chinese Exclusion Act*. All of these events, amid many others, derived into the Chinese experiencing large changes on their lifestyles as the impact of the aforementioned measures did hugely restrict how and where they could freely work and reside.

By the start of the 20th century, Japanese and Korean immigrants were not in a favourable state but were still living under better conditions and fewer restrictions than

Chinese individuals in the USA. But this would not last long as in 1907 large waves of Japanese immigrants entered the US, thus leading to the 26th President of the USA, Theodore Roosevelt to put up restrictions for Japanese and Korean immigrants with the *Executive Order 596*. This was followed 10 years later by the *Immigration Act of 1917* which banned Asians, anarchists, homosexuals and people with intellectual disability from entering the USA.

The Anti-Chinese, Anti-Japanese and Anti-Filipino sentiments that originated after the 1877, 1917 and 1934 events respectively, ensued into a general Anti-Asian sentiment in the USA. Filipinos could return from the USA to their native land only at a rate of 50 individuals per year, following the *1935 Filipino Repatriation Act*. But this situation was also subject to change, as the USA saw in Japan a common enemy between them and China, after *WWII* and the *Second Sino-Japanese War* respectively. With the *Magnuson Act of 1943*, the Chinese immigration was once again re-instated but the Asian-American relations deteriorated through the second part of the 20th century with the *Vietnam War* and the *Korean War*.

Nowadays tensions between Asian-Americans and other races are constant. The feeling of insecurity is, reportedly, affecting 3 out of every 10 Asian-American citizens. A study (PewResearch, 2021) suggests that after the Covid-19 outbreaks, over 32% are fearful of physical attacks or threats. This study also shares a statistic where 81% of Asian adults claim that “violence against them has increased”. This correlates to polls at a national scale (HealthAffairs, 2021). Americans vastly blamed China for the Covid-19 Crisis with 64% considering it a “major reason” and 18% a “minor reason”, thus 82% of the population putting the blame on China. Violent reports and altercations escalated to shootings and murders, mainly 2019 through 2022, in fatal events such as the one that transpired in March 2021 where six women and two men were shot dead in Atlanta, Georgia.

It is stated that “Americans are also now more likely to believe that referring to the coronavirus as “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan virus” is appropriate”, “1 in 3 believe that Asian Americans are more loyal to their country of origin than to the U.S.” or that “1 in 10 Asian Americans have been coughed on or spit on, and nearly 1 in 3 have been told to “go back to your country.” (Lee, 2022). These verbal and physical attacks have had a

considerable impact upon Asians in the US, as 38% of Asian adults in the US have reported worsening of their mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic, with 58% of the total saying that their mental health was somehow affected during this period. This has not gone unnoticed and many Asian celebrities or from the world of sports have used their social media platforms to advocate for a fair treatment of the Asians and to put an end to the anti-Asian hatred. Some of the most outstanding ones are the Korean actor Daniel Dae-Kim, known for his roles in *Lost* or *Hawaii Five-0*, former NBA superstar Yao Ming or former NBA Champion Jeremy Lin (both of Chinese descent).

After the research done above, it can be concluded that racism and segregation in the USA remain present, although they appear in different manners than they did in the past centuries. The interaction and intertwining of racism and sport throughout the last 200 years is also something worth of analysis, as it could help on the understanding on how it started, evolved and how does it affect the American society nowadays.

2. Racism in US Sports History – From the American Civil War to the NewMillenium.

American sports' federated national leagues were not all founded during the same period. Some sports, such as baseball, have a more lengthy history than others such as basketball. This also means that the interaction between races and the parallel evolution of sport have coexisted for longer periods in some disciplines. Although almost two centuries have passed since the formation of the first federated leagues of baseball, basketball or American football, the racial problem still permeates the landscape of these sports in the USA.

– 2.1. 19th American sports – Segregation, Jim Crow laws and the Negro Leagues.

The oldest example of these sports in the USA dates back to 1786, where, via an article (Collectible IVY), a diary from a Princeton College athlete talks about a sport named “Baste Ball”, which is assumed to be an early name for the sport of baseball. It would be over a century later, in 1903, that Henry Chadwick published an in-depth article about the sport and hinting that it had its origin in a game originally from England by the name of “rounders”. These affirmations were not well received by executives from the *National League of Professional Baseball Clubs*, which led to a debate that ended up awarding the late Abner Doubleday, a general in the Civil War, the invention of the game.

According to statistics (Pro Football Hall of Fame), it would take precisely 100 years from the invention of baseball in the USA until the invention of American football or football (not to be confused with soccer/European football). It would be in 1876 that Walter Camp would lead the change from a European football-style based sport into a rugby-style based one in the “Masoit convention”. The first official rules were written down and established as the guidelines for the sport during this convention, taking influence primarily from Eastern schools, such as Princeton, where rugby had risen in popularity over soccer during the prior decade.

The last sport out of the main trio in the USA to be born is basketball. It was invented in 1891 by a P.E. teacher called James Naismith, who worked at the *International YMCA Training School* in Springfield, Massachusetts. It is notable that this sport first gained traction at the College level and then transitioned to the pro level, with the first example of a professional league not being formed after 10 years had passed since the first edition of the NCAA Tournament. (Electro Mech) expands on the subject of the NCAA Tournament, as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which was formed in 1908, organised a 32-team tournament in 1939. This tournament remains one of the most important College sport events held annually, now having a 64-team format. This blossoming of basketball was quickly followed by the creation of the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 1949, which was soon recognised as the most important league in the World.

These three sports had vastly different origins and were created in eras where the politics, the extension or the cultural movements of the USA were not alike. The first example of this comes with baseball. This sport had lost some part of its popularity to cricket during the Civil War. After the end of the conflict in the spring of 1865, the US abolished slavery and tallied up to over a million deaths during the war. In the previous period, a sport that was purely American, could not top the popularity of an English one: cricket. Efforts went seemingly unnoticed, as most media coverage was focused on cricket rather than baseball. But after the establishment of the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP) in 1857 and the first edition of a league under that name, with 20 teams and a championship in 1858, the rise in popularity began to occur, according to *Retro Seasons*.

The Team membership rose up to 60 teams in 1860, but decreased to less than half of that amount during the war, hitting a low point of 28. At this point in time, when the war ended and the years after its ending, the popularity of baseball was at an all-time high, with baseball being the most important sport in the USA and with over 200 teams inscribed in the NABBP. These events led to more successful editions of the national league year after year, ending up with what could be considered proto-All Star games at the end of the 1860s decade (although according to *History.com* the first baseball All-Star game was held in 1933), and the eventual creation of the first ever baseball professional team in 1869 with the Cincinnati Red Stockings (now Cincinnati Reds).

Teams came from all over the United States territory, but all of them had something in common: the players were all White males. Blacks had been relegated to more mechanical and tiring sport disciplines during the slavery era. Non-whites were deemed subordinates to their owners even in sports and only allowed to compete or participate in sports such as horse riding or any that involved pulling, throwing or involved the need of extreme or tiring physical force. These kinds of sports were used by the African Americans as means to channel their emotions while the Whites hoarded sports like cricket, where they could remain stationary during certain periods of time and where skill was more important than strength in most cases.

After the abolition of slavery in 1869, non-whites were deemed free. This made the playing field more even for them in many regards, at least on paper. The acceptance of Blacks in baseball was almost non-existent and racism during the 1870s in this sport became normal. Teams were not accepting non-whites in the rosters and players who were considered stars at the time even threatened with leaving the leagues they played in if African Americans joined any of the teams. This was an issue that occurred both in major and minor leagues. This issue translates to all sports that involved leagues, competitions or federations of their own at any level in the USA, but none of them with the repercussions that baseball held.

Black players being denied a contract in professional American sports is a turning point in this country's sport history, as the stated "Telling the story of baseball in America [...] while only using the names of stars like Babe Ruth, Rogers Hornsby and Joe DiMaggio is indeed only telling half the story" (MLB, 2023). Ruth or DiMaggio are well-known white figures in baseball history, but this quote goes to say that there are others who belong in the same rank as these legends of the game and are of different ethnicities. This moment in history defined the terms "Color Barrier", which was the term used to name the stipulation that prohibited African Americans or those who descended from Blacks from participating in the MLB or, by extension any league that was linked to it. This was banned in the year 1947, but until then, these players had to find a way to play sport professionally, which led to the eventual creation of the Negro Leagues during the late 1870s and early 1880s.

The Negro Leagues extended both to major and minor leagues with players being amateur to professional. These leagues were exclusively composed of individuals of Black ascendancy and operated under the same rules official leagues did. Although the talent in these leagues was often resounding, the attendance and the income they got from their games were usually extremely low when compared to the official leagues in the US at the time. These factors added up quickly and the first instances of Negro Leagues were quickly dismantled. But after the merging of 3 teams in 1885 to create the “Cuban Giants”, which came to be the first ever fully African American professional baseball team with a salary, the Negro Leagues initiative managed to attract more popularity than ever before.

This period was characterized for being part of the almost 100 years where the Jim Crow laws took place (1877-1968). (History) states that these laws, created during the post-Civil War era and named after a character from the *Black minstrel show*, banned African Americans from exerting or ultimately denying them basic human rights like education, voting or the right to participate in certain activities such as sports. The breaching of these laws would result in them facing “arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence and death.” It is remarkable that during this period there was a man who was willing to challenge the standards. And it was not a Black man but a White one: Frank Leland.

Frank Leland was a former professional baseball player whose love for the game led to him advocating in favour of the Negro Leagues’ teams. In 1888 he was the first individual that managed to close a deal in which several Black businessmen invested in the Chicago team from the Negro Leagues as well as gaining the rights from that city’s government to play in South Side Park. Breaking glass ceilings like the one of having a team of Black baseball players being sponsored by businessmen was ground-breaking at the time. The Chicago Union was formed after the investment was finalised. Leland managed to stay relevant in the world of baseball Negro Leagues, eventually leading

him to combine the Chicago Unions with the Columbia Giants, giving birth in 1901 to the Chicago Union Giants. He managed the team until 1912, and the team even sported his name, being called “Leland Giants” between 1905 and 1909. As said in his biography, Leland was known as “as a pioneering organiser, manager, and owner” (NLB eMuseum).

During the first decade of the 20th century and the last of the 19th century it was not only baseball that denied access to Blacks into their ranks, but also football and basketball. None of the three had a player that was not either White or of White ascendancy. None but one: the MLB. With the first recorded debuts of most non-Caucasian players in the major American sport leagues being almost exclusively held in the years after 1920, there was one man who managed to be part of the most important baseball league in the world in the year 1902: Lou Castro.

The Colombian born in 1876 is considered as the first ever Latino to play professional baseball in the MLB (Hispanic History Baseball Museum Hall of Fame). His performances in his rookie year in 1897 were so good that semi-professional teams from New York and New Jersey acquired his services that very year. Two years later, by 1899 he was already playing in the semi-professional leagues and in 1902 he landed a contract with the Philadelphia Athletics. His signing in 1905 for the Kansas City team and his eventual retirement there were the later stages of his career in the professional baseball scene. Described as a player with “charisma and overwhelming personality, and that made this man be remembered on and off the field.” (The HHBM HoF).

This period is also a period of change when regarding the currents of thought that took place in these decades. African Americans were starting to rebel against discrimination and one important instance of such movement is the creation of the National Negro Business League in 1900. The founder was Booker T. Washington. For around five years he remained as the visible head and leader of the movement for equality between races. It was in 1905, when a group under the leadership of sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois launched the Niagara Movement, in which Booker was left behind as a leader claiming that his approach to the cause was “too conciliatory”,

according to records (Library of Congress). By 1910, the first ever Black millionaire woman in history, Madame C.J. Walker, opened a company dedicated to the caring of hair in Illinois.

It is at this moment in time that one of the most turbulent periods in American History begins. The start of WWI and the increasing discomfort by African Americans started to add up. Sports were paralyzed during this period and from 1914 to 1918 very little action was observed in athletics, at least in the professional aspect. Football was used as a means of training soldiers during that time. The physical conditioning that came from practising gridiron football during war times was beneficial for the soldiers as well as helping them mentally while enjoying a healthy past-time activity. An article it is confirmed that “football had been played by many of the young men entering military training camps around the U.S.” (National Museum of WWI and Memorial).

Sports during WWI were also important when looking towards the future. Many soldiers had athletic backgrounds and had received formation on one or more sports during their lifetime, or even played them professionally. This was also the case for other countries’ soldiers, as when they gathered in the battlefronts, they reportedly “became so enthusiastic about competitive sports – especially football – that a large number of survivors continued to indulge in their passion even after the end of the war:” according to an article published (International Encyclopedia of WWI, 2019). This bond that was created by the mutual love for sports that the allied soldiers held resulted in the “Inter-Allied Games” of 1919 that took place in Paris, where over 1,500 soldiers participated.

It was in 1920 that regular sports activity was resumed in the USA. This year marked a very important moment in the history of segregation and racism in USA’s sports history. The National Football League (NFL) was founded and the teams that comprised such league accepted non-White athletes in their rosters. This is the first time in American sports history that a professional league had players under contract from three or more races at the same time.

In baseball there were three Black men that played (all less than one season) in an all-White league: William E. White in 1879 and Moses F. Walker and Wendy Walker both in 1884. There was also the aforementioned case of Lou Castro. But there was never an overlapping of three or more races in professional sport in the US up until this point. According to records, the first Latino to ever play in the NFL was Ignacio Saturnino “Lou” Monet and the first African American was Fritz Pollard, although the latter was much more controversial than the first (Pro Football HoF). As Monet played his career as a halfback with average stats and was never in the conversations amid the greatest of his time (Red Grange or Jim Thorpe are never in the same conversation as Monet), Pollard was remembered for years after he left the NFL. Pollard’s presence in an NFL roster was a concerning matter for several owners in the league, so much so that after his retirement, “the NFL owners imposed a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ preventing the signing of more black players.” (NFLPA). It would not be until 1946 that any other Black player would join an NFL roster.

For Asians it took them longer to have representatives in the major leagues, exactly until 1927, when Arthur Matsu became both the first ever Asian player in the NFL and the first ever Asian quarterback in the NFL, as he played that season for the Dayton Triangles. This stands out as the quarterback role is often and historically a position almost exclusively reserved for Whites, as according to data (USA Today), during the past season there were 53 White QBs or 71% of the league. The 1927 campaign is also a remarkable event, as this season overlaps the careers of the three non-White football players mentioned above. It is the first instance where 4 or more races competed at the same time in an American sports league, making it five when Walter “Sneeze” Achiu (Hawaiian) joined Matsu in the Daytons’ roster.

The 1920s are not exclusively about football, but also about baseball. In this decade there is one man who took the league by storm and revolutionised the sport. The so-called “dead ball era” came to an end after a pitch to the head of Ray Chapman in 1920 caused his death. Changes in rules and in equipment composition such as balls and bats made the sport change towards a more modern era. But it is not because of those things that the MLB holds an important spot during this period in time. Babe Ruth had a stellar 1919 season and was sold from the Boston Red-Sox to the NY Yankees in 1920. His transfer move solidified his career as an all-time great, earning him All-Star honours and

three World Series championships during that decade, which added up to the three he had won in Boston during the 1910s and one more he would win in 1933. He won the Most Valuable Player Award (MVP) in 1923, although the rule stated that, at the time, one player could only win such an award once in their careers, this is why he is often in the conversation about possibly winning more MVP trophies than he did if modern-day rules applied back then, according to statistics (ProBaseball Reference).

The absence of other races in American sport during these years propitiated the continuous growth in the amounts of recognition, awards and records held by Whites in the era between the First and the Second World War. Despite many of these awards having restrictions when being given at the time, these did not have any impact on the race that received such trophies. This is a sensitive topic when discussing overall talent throughout history, especially in the MLB, as the MVP trophy was first awarded in 1911 and until 1946 there was not a Black player in the MLB, nor was a winner until 1949.

Until WWII, non-Whites suffered from segregation, racism and humiliating treatment in many aspects of their daily lives. Anti-Filipino movements grew strong during this period and so did Anti-Black ideologies. Racial tensions were at a very delicate point and in some place there was no apparent way to calm things down. Many Whites decided to make use of violence to fight for or protect their belongings and lands, even if there were not real threats from citizens of other races. It is remarkable that these instances of violence and racially-targeted attacks were very prominent in the state of Illinois. An article illustrates the epidemic of violence and madness surrounding racist lynchings that took place during the 1920s in this part of the US: “At a time when Southern states supported hanging Black men who were falsely accused of crimes against white residents, Illinois experienced more lynchings than most Midwestern states” (Chicago Crusader). The “Reconstruction Era” was less of a period of recovery than it was of segregation, as many communities suffered from racism and the opportunities for non-White athletes to join skill-based sports was close to non-existent.

The Second World War is known for the infamous clash between Germany and the US, but what is often overlooked is that this very duel had already happened in 1938 with the boxer Joe Louis defeating Max Schmeling. Both of them would be drafted by USA and Germany respectively to fight in WWII. Footballers also joined the forces in

the war fronts, as over 1,000 professional players went on to battle for the US between 1939 and 1945. This lack of players in the league led to a shortage of players in the teams' rosters, but as explained by *Warfare History Network* "the National Football League's Pittsburgh Steelers and Philadelphia Eagles merged temporarily in 1943 to form the Steagles." This is remarkable, as even though the teams did not have enough players to compete and had to join forces with other franchises during the WWII period, they chose to do that over bringing non-White players into their rosters. During this period football remained less popular than baseball and boxing, which still led the charts as the most-enjoyed sports in America.

After the Second World War ended, segregation was still prominent in the USA. Despite Blacks having joined the ranks for their country in the War, none were ever awarded any kind of recognition or Honour Medal for their services, not even posthumous. This instance of segregation was one of many, as Black soldiers did even have to give up their seats in trains that transported them during the War so Nazi prisoners could have a seat. This issue is well documented in (Reiss, vol. 3). It is difficult to understand nowadays how it is possible that a man fighting for his country, who has won the battle, has to take a step back to an enemy prisoner just because of their skin colour. This period also saw the Mexican-US Border being expanded and Anti-Asian sentiment growth, with segregation and eventual expelling of Asian children from schools in some states.

2.2 - The end of segregation, the Civil Rights Movement and the ascent of non-White athletes.

Brighter events happened during the 1940s, as the Civil Rights Movement gained traction and approached its most influential years in the two decades that followed. Court cases for the illegality of segregation in schools were held and started to look like a matter of concern for citizens outside of activists. Moreover, sports were now, more than ever before, turning into a business even after the country was engulfed in a World War, had just left a period of reconstruction and was going through another difficult one with the Great Depression. The most important years for American Sport during this period were, without any debate, 1945 and 1946. In 1945 the NFL's 12 year ban of Black players ended (the one which started after Fritz Pollard's retirement in 1933), thus allowing African

Americans to be signed by NFL teams. 1946 would mark the year when the first four African American signings of this period would be made, with “Kenny Washington and Woody Strode going to Los Angeles Rams and [...] Bill Willis and Marion Motley to the Cleveland Browns” (NFLPA).

The MLB had one key event happening in this period, where the Jim Crow laws were finally lifted and Black players were allowed into the league in 1946. The era of segregation was seemingly over once the lifting of these laws was passed and the teams were allowed to sign athletes that were non-White, with the first and most important example of this being Jack Roosevelt “Jackie” Robinson. The man native from Georgia was signed to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1946 and debuted in 1947 for the team after a brief spell in Kansas City with the Monarchs, a Negro League team. The game he debuted in marked the breaking of the “Colour Line” and putting an end to segregation in baseball in the US. His superb first season in the league granted him All-Rookie honours and secured him the first-ever Rookie of the Year award. His 1949 MVP-winning season and the values he represented both as a player and a barrier-breaking individual for African Americans and baseball players have led to his number (#42) being retired in almost every team around the league as a sign of respect and admiration.

Football and baseball were not the only sports that had a turning point in their development during 1946. Basketball’s most famous league was founded in 1946. The NBA began to exist during that year, although it was not under that name, nor was it the spectacle that it is today. It was born to be played and serve as entertainment for hockey fans while the National Hockey League held their winter-break. The basketball league was named Basketball Association of America (BAA) and held that name until 1949 when it merged with the National Basketball League (NBL). For the first few years, the amount of teams was low and the championships were won mostly by the Minneapolis Lakers during the initial years, with George Mikan being the most important player during those feats. It would not be until 1950 that any African American player would join the NBA, as Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Nat Clifton “blaze a new path in NBA” (NBA, 2021).

These instances of the leagues leaving segregation behind and adapting to the new currents of thought showed that politics and ideological movements still influenced sports. The impact of the African American players was felt almost immediately in all three major sports as MVP awards were won by Black athletes during the 1950s in all three disciplines. In the NBA Bill Russell was the first ever Black MVP

in 1958, the year in which he won his second of 11 Championship Rings. In the MLB the aforementioned Jackie Robinson won his first World Series in this decade, out of the six he participated in in his career. In the NFL "Night Train" Lane managed to exceed all expectations by being able to play Cornerback on defense and Wide Receiver on offense during the same game. Jim Brown ran the ball for the Cleveland Browns during the 1950s and 1960s and won two of his three MVP trophies in 1957 and 1958.

The 1960s are also the decade where Martin Luther King J.R. 's led movement for Civil Rights reached its highest popularity point. According to an article (NCAACP), the march organised by MLK in 1963 was "history making". MLK was born in 1929 in Georgia and was witness to his father leading a march advocating for the right to vote of Black Americans as well as against the discrimination they faced at the time in that regard. His *alma mater* was the Morehouse College in his native Atlanta, followed soon after by a stint at the University of Boston, where he became a doctor in theology.

Soon after finishing his studies and getting married, he established his home in the town of Montgomery, where one of the most well-known Black activists, Rosa Parks, became famous after not giving up her seat to a white male in the bus. MLK was quoted saying "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." (NAACP). In *Letter from a Birmingham jail*. These affirmations ended up being right as he and fellow pacific protestors were attacked by police officials during nationally broadcasted events, which led to "nationwide outrage".

His attempts at reaching a fairer and even playing field for Black Americans during this period, which ultimately was achieved with the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act a year later in 1965. His success towards a brighter future for African Americans did not stop there, nor were those the first times where his leadership managed to open previously closed doors for Blacks in the US. Before the happenings mentioned above, MLK had delivered a speech that has been imprinted in American society ever since and has served as the bastion for many Civil Rights protests and movements that came afterwards. It was the "I Have a Dream" speech and it was delivered in 1963, "when King and the SCLC worked with NCAACP

and other civil right' groups to organise the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which attracted 250,000 people to rally for the civil and economic rights of Black Americans in the nation's capital." according to an article (NCAACP).

MLK also drew negative attention towards his persona during the late 1950s and the 1960s, from individuals like Richard Nixon and was even sent to jail twice during these two decades. In prison he wrote *Letter from Birmingham Jail* where he "passionately disagreed, saying the unjust situation necessitated urgent action. He wrote: 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.'". Despite always taking a pacific approach towards segregation and racism, his detractors were not alike. This was ultimately seen during the trip he made to Memphis, TN in 1968, where he was attempting to support the African American workers from the sanitary sector that were on strike. Here he was shot dead by James Earl Ray.

MLK's death did not go unnoticed as his and Malcolm X's assassinations "radicalised many moderate African American activists, fueling the growth of the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s." as per *History.com*. This impacted the sports landscape as well, which resulted in one of the most, if not the most iconic image related to the Black Power movement. This event took place during the Olympic Games of 1968 in Mexico City. During the ceremony where the 200-metre race medals were awarded. After setting a world-record mark of 19.83 seconds, Tommie Smith was on the top of the podium, with the Australian Peter Norman in second place and John Carlos finishing third. Both Smith and Carlos were African American athletes and planned to raise their right fist in a black glove to advocate for the rights of Black Americans. These actions were also accompanied by them unzipping their warm-up jackets, them wearing necklaces of beads and also receiving their medals without shoes on. All of these signs showed solidarity towards different African American collectives which had suffered from some kind of oppression. This was inspired by Harry Edwards, the leader of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPFHR), who instigated Black American athletes to somehow make an attempt at boycotting the Olympic games.

All three members wore badges representing the OPFHR, but Carlos forgot his gloves prior to the event, so Norman insisted on him raising his left fist in a black glove belonging to Smith. This is the reason why Carlos' pose differs from the usual Black Power fist image that is used to represent that movement.

Both athletes were engulfed in criticism during the following days and weeks, with even personalities from the Olympic Committee enrolling into the drama caused by the African American track runners. The American Avery Brundage faced some resistance from the US Committee but they ended up budging to his threats of suing and banning the whole race track team from the Olympic village, ultimately expelling both runners from the Olympic trip. Subsequent events created an almost demonic image of both Black athletes, their actions in Mexico were labelled as "Angrier, nastier, uglier" (Times), making a mockery out of the Olympic motto "Faster, Higher, Stronger". This ostracism towards the pair of runners did not make them lose focus on their careers, as both Smith and Carlos managed to succeed both in the NFL and track running respectively, gaining honors for their courageous actions back in 1968.

The following decades showed an increased number of non-whites making their way to the top flights of American sports. The number and importance of awards, records and championships held by non-white players in the 1970s and the late 1990s is resounding. The rise, establishment and hoisting of these athletes during these decades, as well as the impact they have had in the evolution of basketball, football and baseball in the USA as well as in their respective leagues is undeniable.

The league that exemplifies this shift the clearest is the NBA. The 1970s was a decade of transition and one defined by Eddie Pells in an article for *AP News* as "a fight-filled, drug-addled operation that had made Black players an integral part of the show, only to be left wondering if those players were chasing away the fans." Spencer Haywood, who played the center position for the, now defunct, Seattle SuperSonics during this era is quoted in this article saying that "There was so much chatter about it becoming a Black league". This claim was supported by the New York Knicks having a full 15-men roster composed only of African American players. A rank of the top 10 players of this decade has only two of them being White Americans (Dave Cowens at number 8 and John Havlicek at number 6) (Bleacher Report). Kareem Abdul-Jabbar tops the chart leaving

no chance to other competitors, not to surpass him but to equal his dominance during this era. He is pictured with the claim that “No player has ever stood above the competition for an entire decade like Abdul-Jabbar did during the 1970s. Neither Wilt Chamberlain, nor Michael Jordan, created such a large gap between the best player and the field.” (Bleacher Report). The player formerly known as Lew Alcindor “was an All Star nine times during the decade. He won the Rookie of the Year, a Finals MVP and five NBA MVPs in the 1970s. He was a six-time All-NBA First Team selection and three-time All-Defensive First Team selection [...] would go on to win five NBA Championships with the Lakers during the 1980s, however he was able to lead the Milwaukee Bucks to a championship in 1971.” (Bleacher Report).

The 1980s brought some debate on the White vs Black duels in the NBA as Larry Bird (white) faced off against Earving “Magic” Johnson (black) during this decade in one of the most iconic basketball rivalries. Bird led a Boston Celtics team that was mostly white to NBA Championship gold three times (1981, 84 and 86 respectively) and won the MVP Award three consecutive times between 1984 and 1986. Johnson earned the MVP honours two times during this period (1987 and 89) and won an NBA Championship ring five times with the Los Angeles Lakers in this decade (1980, 1982, 1985, 1987 and 1988). The historic Celtics-Lakers rivalry that emanated from the times where Bill Russell amassed 11 Championships was re-ignited during this period. It was in this decade too that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar retired as the all-time NBA leading scorer with 38,387 points (before being surpassed by LeBron James in 2023) and the most minutes played in a career with 57,446, all according to data (Basketball Reference).

The 1990s is arguably the most popular NBA era of all time, as the triumphant entrance of Michael Jordan into the main scene of USA basketball is one of the most important in sports history. “His Airness” managed to get two three-peats (three Championships in a row) with the Chicago Bulls as well as an all-time best NBA regular season record in the 1995-96 season. Jordan led a team both of black and white players to one of the most memorable decades in NBA history by any team. The dominance of Jordan was accompanied by a fantastic supporting cast in Dennis Rodman and Scottie Pippen (both Black players), although some of the most important shots in the conquest of some of the rings were thanks to white players like current Golden State Warrior coach Steve Kerr (game 6 of the 1997 NBA Finals game-winner vs Utah Jazz).

The greatness of Jordan during this period does not only extend to his NBA success but also to the steam-rolling performance that Team USA put on at the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics, where they went unbeaten on their way to the Gold medal, with an almost retired Larry Bird and a Magic Johnson that came out of retirement just for the event.

It goes to show how far the NBA had evolved from the periods where all-white males hoarded all the top-player ranks and awards, to a completely different era, where according to historical sports database entries (ESPN), out of the 10 MVP trophies awarded during the 1990s, six different players managed to be awarded such distinction, all of them were of African American ascendance (Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, David Robinson, Hakeem Olajuwon and Karl Malone). The NBA became a league where different races co-existed and played together in a competitive environment that went to show how big the step forward is towards a multicultural sports landscape where players are judged and valued for their skill on the court over their race or origin.

It is also remarkable how protected the American identity became during these decades in other sports disciplines such as wrestling, where companies like WWE pursued the glorification of wrestlers portrayed as national heroes that battled against foreign or non-white wrestlers with borderline, and sometimes straight stereotypical and racist gimmicks. The most known and prevalent image of this type of wrestler is Hulk Hogan. Hogan was, following match data (The Internet Wrestling Database), unbeaten in over 1,100 matches, only losing four times via pinfall (3-count) between 1983 and 1993, while wrestling against other talent that represented enemies of America. These included Yokozuna (a sumo-wrestler from Japan that was dethroned by Hogan after the manager of Yokozuna accidentally blinded him with salt), The Iron Sheik (an Iranian heel that used illegal tactics and submission moves to win matches), Sgt. Slaughter (an American military Sergeant turned Iraqi sympathiser during the Gulf War) or Kamala and Papa Shango (both an African Voodoo Master and a Blackman with skull-theme facepaint and esoteric drawings all over their torsos).

It can definitely be understood that the admiration of the fans for the athletes during the late decades of the 20th century could be either towards their patriotism and All-American persona regardless of the racist situations they could be involved in, or on

the contrary, because of the way they perform in their sport and the values they transmit when watching them play.

3. The 21st Century.

In the current day there are two views on racism in sport that go against each other. Some sources claim that racism is decreasing although still present, as stated (Lapchick, 2020). Others defend that the increasing use of social media networks favours the spreading of racism, so is the case of the abuse English soccer players Marcus Rashford or Raheem Sterling suffered on their Instagram profiles in 2020 when they missed their penalty kicks in the Euro Finals of that year. Both points have supporting evidence behind them, but what is being overlooked is that the problem of racism has also been addressed more than ever in the past few years. Megastars from all kinds of sports have used their social media platforms to advocate for the end of racism as well as a way to give voice to those who do not have the means to express how racism or segregation negatively affects them.

The launch of non-lucrative organisations or sport campuses or events held by either athletes or major leagues are now popular and look to eradicate racism and to give opportunities to those who either do not have the means or suffer from unfair racial treatment via the means of sport. Some of the most outstanding ones are “In Memory of Arthur” which was launched by Philadelphia 76ers center and current NBA MVP Joel Embiid or the Sport Campuses held by the NFL in Central Africa, where players born in places like Senegal, Nigeria or Cameroon hosted football camps for kids that, otherwise, would have had an unlikely chance to reach a bright future like the one offered by Embiid’s initiative or would have never been able to enjoy training with top-tier NFL equipment and professional players from their regions in Africa for the ones assisting the NFL camps.

In the recent past the popularity of Heritage Months has risen exponentially, with different races having a calendar-year month dedicated to their culture. This initiative has managed to solidify a sense of identity when these certain months come around, with iterations of such celebrations even reaching the video game level. Versions of Madden NFL games from *EA Sports* since 2020 have celebrated Black

History Month in January, the Asian and Pacific Islander Month in May, the Latinx Heritage Month in September or the Native American Heritage Month in December. These month-long events are also celebrated in the social media profiles of the NFL, NBA or MLB, with pictures, videos or quotes from influential athletes that belonged or belong to those leagues, exhibiting their pride for their heritage as well as their fight against segregation and racism when being part of an ethnicity subject to mistreatment by other races.

It is also noteworthy the involvement of the major American sports leagues, especially NFL and NBA about the BLM movement and the assassination of George Floyd in 2020. The NBA banned in the mid-2000s any kind of gear, from facecheek-band-aids to arm sleeves that had any kind of message or logos that was not either the name or the logo of the official gear sponsor for the league (Adidas at the time), but let the 2014 Miami Heat, Cleveland Cavaliers, L.A. Lakers or Brooklyn Nets wear black shirts with the “I CAN’T BREATHE” message printed on them. *ESPN* gathers the thoughts of some players in an article where “Players like Derrick Rose, LeBron James and Kobe Bryant have brought clarity to the issues. The disparity between the significance of black lives and the power of the police has reached “a tipping point,” as Bryant called it.” The NFL and NBA embarked on a similar project during the games after the 2020 Covid Lockdown where players bore supportive messages or words on the back of their shirts where their name would normally be (NBA) or on their back helmet bumper, where the name of NFL team is normally found. Some of the messages and words included “Equality”, “No to racism”, “I can’t breathe”, “Floyd” or “Black Lives Matter” according to an article (ANDSCAPE) in 2020. The NBA discontinued these designs after the season ended, but some NFL players do still have custom bumpers on their helmets.

On a final note it is very important too how non-white players are impacting and changing the game in the US today. One important event that took place in January was that both Super Bowl starting quarterbacks were Black. This marked the first time in history where at least one of them was not white. Doug Williams talked about it in an interview for *PBS News*. Prior to that was the historic 2019 season by Lamar Jackson, Black QB for the Baltimore Ravens, when he rushed for 1,200 yards and threw for over 3,300 yards, as per *NFL* data. In basketball, LeBron James became the all-time leading

scorer in NBA history and currently sits at 38,652 regular season points according to data gathered online (Olympics). Stephen Curry was named the first-ever unanimous MVP in 2016 in the history of the NBA and scored a single-season record 402 three-pointers and now sits at an all-time high 3,390 three-pointers made (Statmuse). Shohei Ohtani, the Japanese baseball player, currently holds the American League MVP trophy, the 2023 baseball World Cup MVP trophy and is the front-runner according to an article on the race for an MVP two-peat (Bleacher Report).

4. Conclusion.

Racism has been present for many centuries in the history of the US, but it has also permeated its sports history. From the blatant inequalities held during the pre-Civil War era, the period where the Jim Crow Laws were in effect or when athletes were valued more because of the colour of their skin, their heritage or their origin, the landscape in American sports has changed in a considerable manner. It is not that racism is not present in today's US sports scene, but that the awareness and the possibilities to react against it are higher and more abundant. And even though racism is still part of the American society, races are all intertwined in American sports creating a landscape full of different essences and talents, making it unique and the most spectacular in the world today

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