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ROZBIORY

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## Athletic Mobility

### Summary

This essay considers the competing ideologies of hard work and natural talent when talking about sporting greatness. Dispelling the myth of the “racial gift” is one of the aims of Scott N. Brooks’s 2008 ethnography, *Black Men Can’t Shoot*, a study of Philadelphia high school basketball that suggests athletic mobility has more to do with mentoring and networking than skill, aesthetics or self-expression.

### Keywords

basketball, coaching, ethnography, work, talent

When the Beijing Olympics came to a close in 2008, journalists and readers’ polls clustered their attention on a single question: Who was the greater Olympian: the American swimmer Michael Phelps, whose eight gold medals at Beijing brought his lifetime total to eleven, or the Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, who won three and also broke three world records?

In answering the question, readers and viewers were not only choosing between individuals but between distinctive styles of behaviour and performance. On the one hand was Phelps, the “medal machine”, the apotheosis of dedicated professionalism: “Eat, sleep and swim, that’s all I can do”, he declared after winning his eleventh gold.<sup>1</sup> On the other was

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Crouse, “In Pool or Out, Olympic Star Stands Apart”, *New York Times*, Aug 15, 2008, access June 01, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/16/sports/16iht-16phelps.15346694.html>.

Bolt, who broke the 100m record in 9.69 seconds and still found time to slow down and celebrate. Jacques Rogge, President of the IOC, found Bolt disrespectful to the Olympic spirit, but most commentators responded with awe. He “didn’t even break sweat” ran the headline in the London *Times*.<sup>2</sup>

Bolt exhibited the easy nonchalance that Castiglione, advising Renaissance courtiers on how to behave, called *sprezzatura*. *Sprezzatura* is not just about concealing effort, making the difficult seem easy, it’s also about conveying the impression that the outcome is not of much concern. It invites the question (asked of Bolt) what would have happened had he really tried.<sup>3</sup> But Castiglione, although he talked a bit about tennis, was little interested in sport. His concern was to identify a social and political style that could not be acquired through the energetic efforts of a burgeoning professional class but rather remained the exclusive provenance of those who were born to it. *Sprezzatura* is inevitably conservative; it says that ability is given not made.

While professional specialisation has now become the norm, the insouciance of the aristocrat retains its appeal. A few months before Bolt’s Olympic sprint, the former England batsman Ed Smith (a public school and Oxbridge graduate) wrote a paean to the amateur values he felt were lacking in modern cricket. There is too much “work ethic” in today’s game, Smith declared, not enough “flair” or “instinct”.<sup>4</sup>

To talk about instinct, flair or talent, is to down-grade both sweat and training regimes in favour of the culture or gene pool into which an athlete is born. Since the late nineteenth century, particularly in America, talent has been as often attributed to race as to class. As whites increasingly defined themselves in terms of managed effort, blacks increasingly became associated, by the same racist logic, with natural-born, unmanageable *sprezzatura*. In 1910, as the Great White Hope Jim Jeffries prepared to fight the first black heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson, white commentators assessed their opposing styles. How would Jeffries, “a thinker” who “undoubtedly” possessed the “worrying qualities of the white race”, fare against the “care free and cool” Johnson?<sup>5</sup> *Plus ça change*. In 2008, Usain Bolt was praised for his “harpichord grin, laid-back manner and God-given talent”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Longmore, “9.69 and He Didn’t Even Break Sweat”, *Times*, August 17, 2008, access June 01, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/969-and-usain-bolt-didnt-even-break-sweat-b7dq57j20mh>.

<sup>3</sup> Nonchalance “makes the onlookers believe that a man who performs well with so much facility must possess even greater skill than he does, and that if he took great pains and effort he would perform even better” (Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967], 70).

<sup>4</sup> Ed Smith, *What Sport Tells Us About Life* (London: Viking, 2008), 17, 5.

<sup>5</sup> “Both in Fine Condition”, *New York Times*, July 3 (1910): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Rick Broadbent, “As Bolt Provides a Welcome Flash of Inspiration, Rogge Can Only Moan”, *Times* [London], August 22 (2008): 85.

God-given talent – or rather, the idea of it – is a mixed blessing. At the same time as the recipient is elevated above the common run of iron-pumping drones, he can be dismissed as relying on genetic advantage or indeed accused of being lazy or arrogant. Moreover, as Franz Fanon argued in 1952, the association of “the Negro” with “the biological” meant that black men were often “locked into” their own bodies, unable to accept that they could do other things.<sup>7</sup> That’s why few black athletes tend to talk about instinct, and why Barack Obama recalled feeling uneasy as teenager when whites asked him if he liked basketball and Stevie Wonder, or praised him for being cool.

I did like Stevie Wonder, I did love basketball, and I tried my best to be cool at all times. So why did such comments always set me on edge? There was a trick there somewhere, although what that trick was, who was doing the tricking, and who was being tricked, eluded my conscious grasp.<sup>8</sup>

The demystification of the idea of the racial gift is the aim of books like *Black Men Can’t Shoot* (2008) by Scott N. Brooks, or Spike Lee’s 2009 documentary about the NBA star Kobe Bryant, narrated by Bryant himself. If Ed Smith wants to rescue sport from the middle-class work ethic and return it to the gentlemanly realm of thrilling “inspiration” and “instinct”, Lee and Brooks reinstate brawn and brains. In place of natural black athleticism, they present nothing more mystical than hard graft, an ability to follow or give instructions, resilience to pressure, and intelligent networking. The very title of Lee’s film says it all: *Kobe Doin’ Work*.

*Black Men Can’t Shoot* is not about the NBA or even, very much, about the big games that make up most sports narratives. That’s because Brooks is not a sportswriter but an ethnographer, and his interest in basketball lies in its uses for the teenaged boys whose lives, he says, “embody the inner-city story” of South Philadelphia.<sup>9</sup> *Black Men Can’t Shoot* is a short and “accessible” book, written in “an easy style”, and Brooks doesn’t give himself much space to flesh out that inner-city story, relying instead on references to the seminal work of his mentors, the sociologists William Julius Wilson and Elijah Anderson.<sup>10</sup> Last year, the three

<sup>7</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Verso, 1986), 166, 225. See also John Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Scott N. Brooks, *Black Men Can’t Shoot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Hartmann, “Review of *Black Men Can’t Shoot* by Scott N. Brooks”, *Contemporary Sociology*, 39 (2010), 2: 146. See William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

men contributed to a collection of essays, edited by Anderson, on what it means today to be “poor, young, black, and male” or, more succinctly, *Against the Wall*.<sup>11</sup> Anderson described the “entrenched structural poverty” in inner-city, post-industrial black communities and the consequent alienation felt by young men.<sup>12</sup> Wilson looked at employment prospects, revealing, for example, that in an average week in 2005 only 23% of young black high-school dropouts were able to find full-time employment, and a growing gender gap in college achievement: in 2003–4, black women received two BAs for every one awarded to a black man.<sup>13</sup> Wilson also explored what he identifies as the cultural problem of “black male self-destructiveness”.<sup>14</sup> This line of argument can be difficult, and has sometimes been interpreted as an attempt to divide the deserving from the undeserving poor. Wilson’s critics maintain that talk of culture merely distracts attention from persistent government failure to reinstate affirmative action and the social support systems dismantled by Reagan in the early 1980s.<sup>15</sup> But while Wilson acknowledges that what has been dubbed “cool-pose culture” is a response to (rather than a cause of) socioeconomic deprivation, he also insists that, regardless, it has little benefit to young black men.<sup>16</sup> With a liberal emphasis on “personal responsibility, individualism and enlightened social engineering”, Wilson instead proposes a number of “modest and realistic” programmes to provide the kind of skills, experience and counselling that might help with the transition from school or prison to employment or college.<sup>17</sup>

Basketball, so often associated with the *sprezzatura* of “cool-pose culture”, can also provide a forum in which its alternative can be taught. In Elijah Anderson’s terms, basketball can be either ‘street’ or “decent”.<sup>18</sup> Brooks is concerned with “decent” basketball – in other words, less about the ways in which playing the sport might be a path to individual NBA fame than as a community-based activity that can have short – and hopefully longer-term benefits to the boys to whom he acts as both coach and ethnographer.

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<sup>11</sup> *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male*, ed. by Elijah Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Elijah Anderson, “Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black and Male”, in: *Against the Wall*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> William Julius Wilson, “The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males”, in: *Against the Wall*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, “The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males”, 64.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Susan D. Greenbaum, *Blaming the Poor: The Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report on Cruel Images of Poverty* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Orlando Patterson, “A Poverty of the mind”, *New York Times*, March 26, 2006, Section 4: 13.

<sup>17</sup> Greenbaum, *Blaming the Poor*, 37; Wilson, “The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males”, 69.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson associates decency with “a real concern with and a certain amount of hope for the future”. ‘street’ values are those of “toughness and self-absorption: to be loud, boisterous, proudly crude, and uncouth”, and unconcerned with family and community (*Code of the Street*, 37, 42, 47).

Brooks is working in a long tradition of community work which sees the playground and gym as the most viable alternatives to “the corner” where the drugs and crime are.<sup>19</sup> In 1899, the English novelist and philanthropist Walter Besant wrote admiringly of gyms in the East End of London as places where boys would not only “work off their restlessness and get rid of the devil”, but “contract habits of order and discipline; they become infected with some of the upper-class ideals, especially as regards honour and honesty, purity and temperance.”<sup>20</sup> Besant’s language is suffused with, and indeed confuses, religious and medical imagery. Disciplined exercise would not only work a kind of exorcism (fifteen minutes with a stout adversary knock the devil out of a lad – the devil of restless and pugnacity) but enact a kind of beneficial contagion. Sport would work its upper-class magic on both individual boys and the slums in which they lived. In 2008 London’s Eton-and-Oxbridge educated mayor Boris Johnson praised the efforts of Kilburn’s All Stars gym “to get kids off the street and allow them to develop new skills in a structured environment where they are surrounded by positive role models.”<sup>21</sup>

Similar ambitions were at play in 1891 when Dr Luther Gulick, head of Physical Education at the YMCA Training College in Springfield, Massachusetts, approached one of his instructors, theology graduate James Naismith, to invent a “not too rough” game to divert “incorrigible” boys during the winter months. Two weeks later Naismith divided the eighteen incorrigibles into two teams, and then gave them a ball and a list of 13 rules. “It was the start of the first basketball game,” he later recalled, “and the finish of trouble with that class.”<sup>22</sup>

The Blade Rogers League of South Philadelphia is not associated with any church, yet the principles behind it are much the same as those that inspired Besant or Naismith. It was formed in 1968 “to help the city get over gang wars”.<sup>23</sup> Scott N. Brooks spent four years in the Blade Rogers League as a participant observer, working as an assistant to veteran coach Chuck Green. His book focuses on the development of two particular boys, known in the book as Jermaine and Ray. The argument is not simply that basketball offers young men “freedom from participating” in drugs and crime, but that it does this by allowing them to maintain

<sup>19</sup> See David Simon, Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood* (New York: Broadway, 1997). Their title is a homage to Elliott Liebow’s bestseller *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (1967). *The Corner* was adapted as an HBO mini-series in 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Besant, *East London* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1901), 172.

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Topping, “Welcome to All Stars: gym at the heart of Boris’s plan to curb youth crime”, *The Guardian*, November 15, 2008, access June 01, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/nov/15/young-people-boxing-boris-johnson-all-stars-gym>.

<sup>22</sup> James Naismith, *Basketball: Its Origin and Development* [1941] (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 56.

<sup>23</sup> Brooks, *Black Men Can’t Shoot*, 25.

status with those members of their peer group who do opt for crime. In other words, becoming a ball player is both the “opposite of being a thug” and a way of gaining respect from the thugs.<sup>24</sup> Brooks also challenges the conventional wisdom that “hoop dreams” sidetrack black kids from the “more viable or realistic goals” offered by education.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, he argues, basketball provides a culturally acceptable reason for boys to stay in school and to aspire to go to college. The choice is not between basketball and studying but between basketball and incarceration. In the forty years since the Blade Rogers were founded, only thirty boys have become professional players, but 300 “alumni” have gained college scholarships. For those who don’t make it to college, Brooks maintains, the “positive short-term effects” of participation are also worthwhile. Jermaine and Ray didn’t just play basketball, they became basketball players, and “this identity worked against feeling poor”.<sup>26</sup> In Mitchell Duneier’s words, it encouraged “a perception of respectability”.<sup>27</sup>

The process that most fascinates Brooks (and produces some of his most revealing descriptions) is how Jermaine and Ray work to establish and develop their reputations. “Getting known” is a complicated process. It’s not merely a matter of playing in as many teams and leagues as possible, for not all teams are equal. The player (under guidance from his coach) must decide where to focus his efforts. One league might offer more opportunities to play, but another might provide exposure to influential people. The story of Ray and Jermaine is one of ever-widening circles. We follow their progress from the asphalt playgrounds of their under-funded, predominantly black schools in South Philly to the hardwood floors and electronic scoreboards of predominantly white schools uptown, on a tour of the eastern seaboard and even, briefly, to Italy. But Brooks resists the smooth narrative of the Hollywood biopic: “If you get good enough you can do anything you want,” says the actor playing Michael Jordan’s father in the opening of the 1996 movie *Space Jam*. *Black Men Can’t Shoot* never forgets how fragile “athletic mobility” is and how quickly it can shift into reverse gear.<sup>28</sup> For every champ, there are thousands who live off the story of how they could have been contenders. Brooks has written elsewhere about men whose adolescent “basketball identity” represents

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, *Black Men Can’t Shoot*, 10, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Reuben A. Buford May, *Living Through the Hope: High School Basketball, Race and the American Dream* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), xvi. Charles Barkley, a former NBA star who is now a TV analyst, introduces the book based on the 1994 documentary film *Hoop Dreams* by saying, “I know you won’t believe me when I say this, but I wish kids, especially black kids, didn’t dream so much about playing in the NBA” (Charles Barkley, introduction to Ben Joravsky, *Hoop Dreams* [New York: Harper Perennial, 1995], 9).

<sup>26</sup> Brooks, *Black Men Can’t Shoot*, 13, 26, 133.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell Duneier, *Slim’s Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 117.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks, *Black Men Can’t Shoot*, 10.

the “peak of their social career, at the same times that it highlights their skewed life course and low-status position in adulthood”.<sup>29</sup>

But, unlike John Hoberman, who argues that ‘black boys’ preoccupation with basketball’ is always part of a disabling ‘social pathology’, Brooks considers the ways in which sport can enable other forms of social interaction and function as a potential “transformational device”.<sup>30</sup> That focus, moreover, doesn’t mean that the way in which the game is played is unimportant. To get ahead in basketball, the kids have to give up the ‘style’ of the playground and learn that of the classroom.<sup>31</sup> In *Elevating the Game* (1992), a history of black involvement in basketball, Nelson George identified a particular masculine “African-American aesthetic” associated with the playground style.<sup>32</sup> Playground basketball is about dribbling, gravity-defying leaps, speed, improvisation and slam dunking. It’s about aggression, arrogance and, as Sidney Deane (Wesley Snipes) pointed out in the 1992 movie *White Men Can’t Jump*, it values “looking good” more than winning.<sup>33</sup> For Nelson, these qualities connect basketball to other forms of black self-expression such as “rapping, sermonizing and soloing”.<sup>34</sup> Films like *White Men* have an ambiguous relationship to this style. On the one hand, they argue that white men want, and need, to tap into the playground aesthetic. On the other, they suggest that aesthetics’s limits for black advancement. Sidney boasts about the time that Michael Jordan suggested he play summer pro-league: “I said «No! Shit might mess up my game»”.

As a coach for the Blade Rogers, an elite “career” league, Brooks worked hard to mess up the playground game, the “oppositional style”.<sup>35</sup> The basketball he advocates is less about self-expression than self-discipline, less about scoring than defending. Playing for the Blade Rogers means tucking in your shirt, watching your mouth, showing up on time, accepting criticism and concentrating on what’s good for the team. Ray and Jermaine learn “organization”, which means they learn to accept authority and hierarchy. For example, Brooks notes how teams work according to an unspoken understanding of each player’s status. “Higher-status individuals” get to monopolize the ball and thus become the team’s leading scorers even if they have a low percentage of successful shots. The boys spend a lot of time assessing

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<sup>29</sup> Scott N. Brooks, “Fighting like a Ballplayer: Basketball as a Strategy Against Social Disorganization”, in: *Against the Wall*, 148.

<sup>30</sup> Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes*, 85; Brooks, *Black Men Can’t Shoot*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Hoberman, *Darwin’s Athletes*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xiii.

<sup>33</sup> Billy Hoyle (the white guy, played by Woody Harrelson) elaborates: “Black guys don’t care whether they win or lose. They just want to look good. White guys don’t care if they look good. They just want to win”.

<sup>34</sup> George, *Elevating the Game*, xiii.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, “Against the Wall”, 17.

their status in relation to each other, but the bond which Brooks believes is most critical is that between the player and his coach. Coaching is about “socialization” but it’s also about parenting. Neither Jermaine or Ray had a father at home: basketball provided them with alternative “old heads”, men prepared to spend time with them and who care enough to plan for their futures. Like a bad father, a bad coach is “invisible”. A good coach is always there, acting as a “role model” and a “mentor”. The boys learn how to play basketball, but just as importantly for Brooks, they learn how to accept authority. What college recruiters really want is someone who is “coachable” and not too “street”.<sup>36</sup> That’s why Chuck Green and his assistant like to work on set plays:

Players are assigned tasks and take on certain roles to be in positions to do what we’d like for them to do, as opposed to making their own decisions. This shows organization and deference. . . . They have to play correctly, or they risk being yelled at and even kept from playing. The system is not neutral; it demands deference to Chuck and me.<sup>37</sup>

But good coaches do not only yell. They feel “responsibility” to their “young bulls” and both tutor their school work and work as their “public relations representatives”, “vouching” for them to other coaches and other leagues. Except for the coach’s intervention, no player, however talented, would make it to college. In short, Brooks demonstrates that the “social aspect of a career or the «politics», managing relationships” is as important to young players as their “performance” on court.<sup>38</sup>

*Black Men Can’t Shoot* can be read as an ethnography of the socialization of the coach as well as his players. Brooks is a mentor to the kids, but he too has a series of mentors, starting with Harry Edwards, author of *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969) and the pioneering American sociologist of race and sport. In Philadelphia he comes to rely for support and guidance on Chuck, the league’s “guru” and “dominant male”. When Chuck gives him more responsibility, Brooks initially feels like a substitute teacher, “temporary, half prepared and only partially effective”. “I had to be an adult”, he recalls, “but I didn’t want to be”. Brooks’s big breakthrough comes when he stops trying to be the “nice guy” and fully embraces his own “authority” and “power” by giving Jermaine a dressing-down. Eventually Jermaine comes to think him as a “father, friend, a big brother”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Brooks, *Black Men Can’t Shoot*, 36, 45, 83, 165.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 79–80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 23, 111, 115.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, 89, 134, 137, 138, 144, 175.

Most importantly of all, Brooks and the teenage boys undergo a process of professionalisation. Brooks deliberately describes them as “building their career portfolios” or working on their “résumés”.<sup>40</sup> Their careful cultivation of contacts and strategic deference recalls that of many young professionals, and it’s hard not to make a direct comparison with Brooks’s parallel journey to “get known” in the academic world. American university careers, like basketball and ethnographic work, rely heavily on networking and mentoring. The four years during which Brooks coached and studied summer basketball formed part of his graduate work in the University of Pennsylvania’s sociology department, where Elijah Anderson acted as his supportive old head.

There may be little *sprezzatura* then but, read both as biography and as autobiography, *Black Men Can’t Shoot* offers a success story. Despite various setbacks, Ray and Jermaine both made it to college. Brooks received his PhD, published his research, and is now Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Riverside. According to his university webpage, he’s also an assistant coach at a Riverside high school.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, 108, 116.

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## Mobilność atlety

### Streszczenie

Opierając się na książce *Black Men Can't Shoot* (Czarni nie umieją rzucać) Scotta N. Brooksa, wydanej w roku 2008 roku etnograficznej analizie akademickich drużyn koszykarskich w Filadelfii, autorka artykułu zestawia ze sobą koncepcje pracy i talentu jako źródła sportowego sukcesu uznawane zazwyczaj za niewspółmierne. Autor komentowanej przez nią książki dekonstruuje mit wrodzonego i zależnego m.in. od rasy talentu predysponującego do uprawiania jakiejś dyscypliny (tu: koszykówki) i dochodzi do wniosku, że nawet na poziomie amatorskim sukces zależy raczej od sposobu alokacji cielesnych zasobów – zarządzania siłami zawodnika, możliwości nawiązywania biznesowych kontaktów itp. – niż od umiejętności, finezji czy stylu gry.

### Słowa kluczowe

koszykówka, trenerstwo, etnografia, praca, talent

*Przetłumaczył Paweł Wolski*

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