

Black Bodies: Biological Racism Among Black Female Athletes^{1*}

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Historically, women have been seen as less capable than men, which has led to stereotypes that women are docile, weak, and ill-suited for leadership roles (Cahn, 2004). Such views have reinforced outdated gender norms that have permeated today's society. Cahn argues that women have also been deemed unsuitable for rigorous athletic activity. Too much and too strenuous activity, it was feared, could cause damage to their reproductive organs (St Paul, 2024). Even when women were finally allowed to engage in sports, they were challenged by limitations, such as being prohibited from running more than 200 yards. Running longer was thought to be too physically demanding for the female body. Even though women are allowed to participate in sports today, the effects of these limitations still exist.

It is imperative then to evaluate interlocking factors when considering the history of women in sports, particularly Black women (Hylton, 2008). This essay will explore the intersections of race and gender in sports. Historically, perceptions of White women in sports, as previously described, vastly differ when you add the adjective, Black. Black women were seen as brutish, lacking feminine grace, and masculine (Cahn, 2004). They were further seen as stronger and more mannish. These overarching stereotypes relate to the idea of the Black body. The impervious Black body and the inelegance of Black women have been especially harmful for the Black female athlete and the Black populace at large. Historical factors like medical racism showcase the adverse effects of such viewpoints. The United States Public Health Service Syphilis Study in Tuskegee, Alabama, which experimented on 600 Black men without

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informed consent, is an apt example of medical malfeasance rooted in racial science (*Tuskegee Study - Timeline - CDC - OS*, n.d.) Black bodies have been seen as durable and therefore expendable and subject to being treated without care. We will explore how the institution of sports has exacerbated these issues, and the interconnection between Black bodies, medical racism, and women in sports.

The Impervious Black Body: An Apple a Day and Medical Racism

Racial disparities abound within the American healthcare system. Inherent bias is an especially intractable issue in medical care (*Black Americans Are Systematically Under-Treated for Pain. Why?*, n.d.). For example, Black people are systematically under-treated for pain. Research indicates that Black patients are notably less likely to be prescribed pain medication and typically receive smaller doses when they do receive it. These findings point to the misconception of the imperviousness of the Black body and its negative impacts. In a study conducted with Division 1 medical staff, they were given identical cases with one contrast concerning an athlete with an ACL tear—that contrast related to one adjective, Black. The medical staff were asked two questions: 1. “How painful was the injury, on a scale of 1-4?” and 2. “Do you agree or disagree? Interestingly, whether you agreed or disagreed with the second question, the medical staff consistently rated the Black athlete’s pain threshold as higher. In another study by Lovejoy et al., they found that whatever their class and educational backgrounds, Black women had higher mortality rates than White women with breast cancer (Lovejoy et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate the oftentimes lethal effects of the flawed idea of the impervious Black body.

Bias on the Mat: Inelegance of Black Women

Corrinne Tarver was the first Black female gymnast at the University of Georgia (UGA). At UGA she was a 9-time All-American and the first Black woman to win the NCAA

gymnastics tournament. In an interview with Dr. Gilman Whiting, Corrinne Tarver, now a gymnastics coach, tells us about her journey as a Black woman in gymnastics. Her story shines a spotlight on the troubling idea of the inelegance of Black women, as highlighted in Cahn's essay (2004). Coach Tarver talked about the scoring system's biases and subjectivity and how it led to unfair scoring. She specifically mentions the pointed toe rule and how because the underside of Black gymnasts' feet might present as starker in contrast to the top of their feet, they are more likely to be docked points for not having pointed toes than White gymnasts (Corrinne Tarver, personal communication, February 22, 2024). Her coaches also expected her to maintain a lower body fat percentage than her White teammates because Black people have higher muscle mass. Coach Tarver mentioned her time on the national team and her aspirations to join the Olympic team. She later discovered that she would never be an Olympic candidate simply because her body type was not what was deemed "elegant" or suitable for gymnasts at the time. Tarver's experiences uncover how the perceived inelegance of Black female athletes has seeped into many facets of society, disrupting Black women athletes' lives and ambitions along the way.

Analysis: Double Trouble

Thus far, this essay has discussed two key concepts that relate to Black women in sports: inelegance and biological racism. These two concepts are connected by the stereotype of the impervious female body. That Black bodies are perceived as stronger, impervious to pain, and more durable has had a disparate impact on Black athletes. Within social contexts, such stereotypes manifest in generalizations of Black people as naturally athletic, disregarding the hours of dedication that Black athletes pour into their craft for continual improvement. Black female athletes are unique in that a double jeopardy confronts them: the struggle of being Black combined with being a woman in America. Both identities are marginalized. In

Corrinne Tarver's case, she competed at a high level and dominated in her sport at the collegiate level; nonetheless, due to these biases, there was a barrier she could not surpass. Black female athletes like Gabby Douglas and Simone Biles have started breaking down these barriers due to the hard work and effort they put into the competition and the persistence of those who came before.

Throughout this essay, we have talked about women's historical experiences in sports, and the divergent experiences of Black women. Three key points are introduced: the idea of the impervious Black body, medical racism, and perceived Black female inelegance. The in-person interview between Corrinne Tarver and Dr. Gilman Whiting illuminated how these factors impact women's sports and their particular effects on Black female athletes. A brief analysis of how these factors converge to perpetuate inequality within society and sports for Black women.

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