

Unforgiveable Blackness

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Much has been said in 2020 related to racial relations in America. The conversions have followed several high-profile deaths of black men, that resulted in protests and tensions along racial lines not seen at such heightened levels since the civil rights era in the 1960s. On one side of the issue are proponents of Black Lives Matter and other groups seeking racial justice and equality by eliminating systematic racism. On the other side of the debate are white nationalists, white supremacist and other groups who want to maintain the perceived status quo of white power and subjugation of all of the other races that don't start with the letter "W" and rhyme with right. The quickness and ferocity of the white supremacists' actions to discredit the calls for racial equality shows that discontent has been simmering under the surface for years just waiting for something to create a spark to ignite the hatred.

The movie *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* details the life of Jack Johnson, an African American boxer who challenged many of the racial norms of the early 20th Century. The norms challenged involved who he should box against, where he could eat, where he could sleep, who he should date, and ultimately who he should marry. The movie details the challenges that Jack Johnson overcame nearly a century ago, however many of the elements described could just as easily describe 2020 instead of 1920.

The title of the film comes from Johnson's unapologetic stance of testing the societal norms about race and not staying within the lines in the coloring book of society in the early 20th Century while the wounds of division from the Civil War were still open in many sectors of the population. The movie paints a picture of a man who was born in Galveston, TX without means or opportunity who fought his way, literally and figuratively, to the top of his profession becoming internationally known, while also faces numerous challenges from competitors who refused to fight him. Johnson also faced battles outside the ring from politicians and other

individuals who took exception to his choice of girlfriends and wives in addition to other ways that he lived his life. Parallels can be made to modern day America as well where some people still resent people of color who are more successful than they are.

After 14 years of dominating the world of boxing, Jack Johnson finally was named world champion at the age of 30 (Burns, et al, 2004). Almost immediately after winning the title, forces conspired to try to take the title away from him since there were some elements of society who felt that having an African American boxing champion went against their narrative of white supremacy (Burns, et. al, 2004).

After several attempts to dethrone Johnson through a search for a “great white hope” who could defeat him in the ring, Johnson was eventually brought to the mat and stripped of his title (Burns, et. al, 2004). Although Johnson lost his title, his impact on the sport of boxing and the way he challenged societal norms in a larger than life manner up until his death cannot be taken away.

Jack Johnson was not the first African American to challenge racial standards, nor was he the last trailblazer to break down barriers in sports while withstanding hatred from a portion of the public that did not welcome them, or felt threatened by their success.

It can be argued that the 45th President of the United States tapped into a vein of hatred and fear in the 2016 election, and in the years since, by giving voice to a segment of the population as a way to strengthen a base of people who do not like those who look and act differently from them. But, as the story of Jack Johnson shows, racism is far from a new sentiment in America and although it may hide in the shadows from time to time it never truly goes away.

While Jack Johnson broke down the barriers in boxing, Charlie Sifford, was the first African American to break the color barrier in professional golf. Much like Johnson before him, Sifford was “subjected to ugly acts of prejudice and humiliation all along the way” (Coast Mag, 2008).

In an interview with the *Coast Magazine* section of the *Orange County Register* in 2008, Sifford stated that, “There’s not a man on this tour who could have gone through what I went through to be a golfer. I still can’t believe I went so long without breaking down or quitting the game... I don’t smile much, and I never laugh. It’s just something that’s in me. If you’d been through what I’ve been through, you wouldn’t be smiling, either” (Coast Mag, 2008).

While Sifford found it hard to smile, Johnson seemed to confront each of his challengers with a smile and a knowing wink as outlined in the film. Just like Jack Johnson paved the way for boxers like Joe Lewis and Muhamad Ali, Sifford, who died on February 3, 2015 at the age of 92, broke the color barrier and paved the way for Tiger Woods, and others to enter the PGA Tour. Woods, who was born in 1975 which was the year Sifford won the PGA Seniors Championship, considers Sifford his “honorary grandfather” (Coast Mag, 2008). Sifford spent nearly a decade as one of the top 60 money winners on the tour after a California lawsuit forced the PGA to strike the “Caucasian member only” clause in 1960 (Coast Mag, 2008).

While PGA tour events were no longer segregated following the 1960 ruling, the Augusta National Golf Club, the sight of the Master’s Tournament waited until 1991 to admit the first African American member to its ranks (Dorman 1997). Four years after Augusta integrated, Tiger Woods made his debut on the PGA tour. In 1997, at the age of 21-years-old Tiger Woods became the youngest golfer in history to win the Masters at the Augusta National Golf Club and ushered in a new era of professional golf (Dorman 1997).

The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, more commonly referred to as NASCAR, is another traditionally white dominated sport that has struggled through the years with inclusion and combating racism. Although there have been a few drivers who were minorities and/or women to race in the sport through the years, Bubba Wallace is currently the only full-time driver in the NASCAR Cup series who is African American (Church, 2020).

In June 2020, while the nation was enveloped in a time of heightened race awareness, Wallace called for NASCAR to ban the Confederate flag, long a staple of race weekends, from their tracks (Cole, 2020). A few days after NASCAR agreed to ban the confederate flag the FBI was called to investigate what appeared to be a noose hanging in Wallace's garage stall in Talladega, AL (Cole, 2020). The investigation concluded that the rope was a garage pull and not a noose. However, the imagery of a noose within an African American driver's garage stall, as well as the protests that followed, showed that some NASCAR fans will revolt if they feel their rights are infringed upon. The calls to blame Wallace for the noose accusation even went so far as the White House where the 45th president called on Wallace to "apologize" (Cole, 2020).

For his part, after the noose investigation Wallace noted in an essay titled 'Come Ride With Me' that, "I've had more run ins with racist people than I have ever before in my life in the past few weeks. All because I spoke up" (Cole, 2020). Regarding the Confederate Flag, Wallace went on to say that, "People will say anything to defend it. But make no mistake: It was a war over slavery. It was about the South trying to keep their slaves" (Cole, 2020).

Just like Johnson and Sifford before him, the attacks against Wallace for standing up for equal treatment continue with the majority population acting like they are the ones being infringed upon.

In addition to the movie focusing on white people feeling threatened that their misguided athletic standards are challenged by successful black athletes, like Jack Johnson, the movie also delves into another of the reasons that Jack Johnson was hated by so many people. In addition to wanting to keep their sports pure in their minds, people also took offense to Jack Johnson's habit of dating white women. In fact, after Johnson won the Heavyweight title, a parade in his honor in his birthplace of Galveston, TX was cancelled after word reached the parade organizers that Jack Johnson was traveling with a white woman (Burns, et. Al, 2004).

Like Jack Johnson before him, Tiger Woods also drew condemnation from both whites and African Americans for his preference in dating and marrying white women (Montgomery, 2009). Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Eugene Robinson of the *Washington Post* noted about Tiger Woods' taste in women that, "the world is full of beautiful women of all colors, shapes and sizes -- some with short hair or almond eyes, some with broad noses, some with yellow or brown skin. Woods appears to have bought into an 'official' standard of beauty that is so conventional as to be almost oppressive" (Montgomery, 2009). The words by Robinson, who is African American, show that white people are not the only ones who take issue with interracial dating and marriage. Johnson and Woods are far from the only examples of Black athletes dating white women but unlike Woods, Johnson was actually imprisoned for dating a white woman.

In 1913 Jack Johnson was convicted in a federal court in Chicago of violating the Mann Act by transporting a white woman, Lucille Cameron, his wife-to-be, across state lines for "immoral purposes" (Montgomery, 2009). The fact that Johnson was tried and convicted shows the length that people were willing to go to punish people for biracial relationships. Although he was convicted in 1913, Johnson fled to Canada and spent seven years living in Europe, South America and Mexico before finally surrendering to federal agents at the United States and

Mexico border in July 1920. Shortly after surrendering at the border, Johnson started a prison sentence in Leavenworth, KS that lasted until July 9, 1921 (Gajanan 2018). In 2018, 72 years after his death, Jack Johnson was pardoned by President Donald Trump (Gajanan 2018).

It is somewhat ironic that a man some say is stoking the fires of a race war, would be the person to pardon Jack Johnson (Cole, 2020). However, it also reiterates that the embers of hatred are also smoldering beneath the surface and every so often people like Jack Johnson, Charlie Sifford, Tiger Woods, and Bubba Wallace cause people to throw gasoline on those embers just because they are afraid of losing their grip on the version of America that only lives inside their heads.

No athlete is perfect, just as no man or women is perfect regardless of their profession. Still, the world is full of flawed trailblazers who pave the way for those who follow behind them. Jack Johnson was one of those flawed trailblazers. When one takes into account the full measure of a person, and balances the good with the bad, one hopes that the scales tip favorably towards the good. Jack Johnson was one of those people who strove to make the world a more inclusive place inside the boxing ring as well as outside of the ring and for his troubles he got hatred from portions of society in return.

The world of 2020 and 1920 are not that different in terms of racial acceptance and inclusion. One has to wonder whether race relations will be any better by 2120.

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