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‘Personal, political, powerful and about so much more than race and sport.’

BERNARDINE EVARISTO, author of the Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other*

‘This searching exploration uses sport to examine questions of race and identity ... Bardowell does an excellent and passionate job of refracting the issues within sport – the dearth of black football managers, the lack of activism from black athletes who have made it into the spotlight – into wider society.’

Financial Times

‘A painful reflection of racism in British sport ... Bardowell ably demonstrates the power of the media to determine the narratives around these sporting lives. He flags up the false binaries often promoted between good (patriotic) and bad (self-centred) black sportswomen and men ... it’s a valuable act of remembrance of sporting stars who put their careers on the line in pursuit of a moral right.’

Observer

‘*No Win Race* has the feel of James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* ... *No Win Race* will stimulate much discussion across generations of readers – both black and white. I would love to see it on secondary school and university curriculums, and with the breadth of what it covers, it should feature on the reading list of many creative disciplines.’

Words of Colour

‘And before you think it’s some kind of sociological tome, that is best left for A-Level students studying Race and Sport – it’s a really good read. There’s lots of very personal recollections about sport, and the beauty of sport, and the power of sport to inspire and bring families together, and plenty of you will reminisce about watching sport growing up with your own parents and watching great sporting moments. You won’t be reading this book and feel like you’re being lectured at, trust me on that one, it’s an enjoyable read.’

NIHAL ARTHANAYAKE, BBC Radio 5 Live

‘A must-read for anyone interested in the cultural politics of sport, the question of English and British nationalism, and what sport can (and can’t) do to produce a more convivial society.’

BEN CARRINGTON, Associate Professor of
Sociology and Journalism in the USC
Annenberg School for
Communication and Journalism

DEREK A. BARDOWELL

**NO
WIN
RACE**

**A MEMOIR OF BELONGING,
BRITISHNESS AND SPORT**


MUDLARK

HarperCollins *Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollins *Publishers* 2019

This edition published 2020

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Derek A. Bardowell asserts the moral right to be
identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record of this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-830514-7

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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To Elle & Keithus
For Meadow & Marlowe

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1. HYMN OF HATE	12
2. BLACKWASHED	35
3. THE SHOT	69
4. SO MANY TIERS	100
5. NEW NATION	133
6. BEYOND SPORT	159
7. THE GREATEST WEEK EVER IN BLACK HISTORY?	188
8. POOR PEOPLE'S OLYMPICS	222
9. DRIVEN TO THE POINT OF MADNESS	257
10. MORE THAN MAGICAL	290
11. IS IT IN THE BLOOD?	302
ENDNOTES	319
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	325

INTRODUCTION

MY TWO KIDS RAN UP the stairs to wash their faces, clean their teeth and put on their pyjamas while I stayed downstairs to pour a shot of rum. I turned on the television. A documentary about Margaret Thatcher had just started. Couldn't think why she'd be on the telly. Had a feeling she'd died. So, I grabbed my iPhone to find out if that was indeed the case. She had died of a stroke, aged 87.

It had been our first night on holiday in an old cottage in Suffolk. The cottage, beautifully worn with creaky floors, low-hanging ceilings, stained rugs, and dusty, stale smells also featured all the modern trimmings required to make it a contemporary holiday retreat for kids, like a PlayStation and an iPad docking station.

I stood, ceiling hovering close over my head, watching the documentary, which covered Thatcher's unlikely rise to Conservative Party leadership in 1975, her battles with 'Heathite' Tories, her election victory in 1979, Bobby Sands, the IRA, the recession, the Brixton Riots, the Falklands War, the Miners' Strike, her battles with the trade unions, the breakthroughs she made for women in politics, the grinding shift from 'society to self', her loathing of the European Community, the end of the Cold War,

NO WIN RACE

the introduction of the Poll Tax, the Poll Tax Riots and her eventual downfall at the hands of her Tory Party colleagues.

My son, two and a half years old at the time, cute and rashy, smiley and whiney, came down the stairs, walked up to me, rubbed his eyes and said in a dull voice, 'Take me [to] bed.'

He put his arms up, so I picked him up.

'You watching TV?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied, 'it's about Margaret Thatcher.' Didn't elaborate, eyes barely shifted from the television screen.

Paused.

I realised I had started to squeeze him tightly. The back of my throat had started to tickle. My hands and my toes were cold and clammy. Not the rum. Should have been thinking about the immediate future, like playing games with the kids in the morning, country walks and beautiful landscapes. Instead, my mind was situated in the past. Always is. I took my son upstairs to bed, the documentary swirling through my head. I thought less about Thatcher's death and more about her legacy.

I remembered what it had been like as a child in the eighties. I grew up in Newham in the East End, which for many black and brown folks meant racially motivated attacks and police harassment, and a general denial that these problems existed from the services that were there to help you. It had been a time when fear, paranoia and insecurity consumed me. From a young age, I felt like an outsider. Felt as if my options, crafted by the grit and hard work of my Jamaican parents, were impossibly narrow. Felt like a problem to the state. Never knew comfort. Never really felt at ease. Bus stops, shops, school, trains, my everyday spaces, brought conflict, stares, stop and searches, anxiety, false accusations and

INTRODUCTION

a fear of other people's fear. I liked my home, my birthplace. England. But never quite felt at home in my birthplace. Never made to feel at home in my birthplace. It had been difficult to feel like a true citizen in a place where you were considered an outsider, in a place where many of the nation's heroes were often my forefathers' oppressors.

Too late for me, I thought. Always be this way for me. Caged, enraged. But what should I tell my son? Things have changed. Things have improved. He is unlikely to experience racism in the same way I had when I was growing up. So how do I prepare him without infecting him?

For me, sport had always been a great leveller. Something that brought me solace, an escape in times of trouble.

It was how my father, Keith, and I bonded. Before I could grip a mug, my father had already shoved a cricket bat and ball in my hands. We would go into our 30-foot back garden and play, my father bowling, me batting. He'd always bowl googlies at me, a deceptive delivery where the ball spins into the batsmen's legs instead of going straight. A magic trick. As my father watched me swing wildly, and miss, his shifty eyes would tighten, and his soft, narrow, light-brown face would break into a cheeky smile before he'd launch into a story about 'back home' – in Jamaica. My father's yearning for Jamaica and the role cricket played in transporting him 'back home', albeit for brief moments, made me recognise that sport was more than a game.

It had often been the case that white people assumed that the colour of my skin and my height ensured athletic excellence. Upon first meeting me, most would ask, 'Do you play basketball?'

NO WIN RACE

‘No,’ I’d reply, never knowing what else to say. I would later come to realise that, for well-meaning white folks, in bowing to a more favourable stereotype (black people being good at sport) they were addressing their own discomfort. For them, a conversation starter and some solace. For me, a conversation closer and anxiety.

Sport offered positive images of black folks at a time when we were bombarded with negative images in the media. Back in the seventies and early eighties, the few shows that featured black actors like *Mixed Blessings*, *Rising Damp* and *Love Thy Neighbour* always emphasised the difference between Caribbean or African culture and the English. They forever depicted us as aliens – sources of fundamental difference, conflict and unrest. The gags were often cheap, cruel and exploitative. Sport, to some degree, balanced out these negative images.

It has always been difficult for me to separate ‘race’ and sport. Alongside music, sport has for many years been a platform where blacks have excelled. Where we’ve been allowed to excel. Whether you liked sport or not, black athletes were the most visible contributors to British society. Black people had of course built Britain, literally. We had constructed, supplemented and indeed strengthened the country. We had done so under forced labour, under poor conditions, with little or no rights, little or no credit. The black athlete’s impact had been more difficult to conceal, their contributions measurable. Goals. Runs. Times. Wickets. Knockouts. Tries. This led to wins, which led to larger audiences, which led to more money, which led to more media coverage, which led to more sponsorship, which led to a higher profile for the black athlete. They were symbolic. Symbolic of everything we

INTRODUCTION

had achieved in this country, for this country. In addition, they seemed to be the only black people in the public eye who were embraced by whites, even if they had to win adoration through a torrent of boos and unconditional allegiance to Jack or George.

Yet at the same time, so much of what happened to black athletes on the field of play reflected the issues faced by black people in British society.

Growing up in the eighties, the popular racism being trumpeted by the mainstream media – moral panics about blacks being a threat to cohesion, to jobs, to safety – weaved its way into sport. The crowds were often hostile towards black athletes and commentary was often stereotypical, preoccupied with our physical attributes while constantly underestimating our sporting IQ. Institutional racism also restricted any hope of black people attaining positions of power or commanding the authority to complain about their treatment.

Thatcher told the nation how Britain had given so much to the world. She told the masses how much she loved Britain, wanted to protect Britain, valued Britain. Didn't doubt it for a second. But she also encouraged a climate where you were either with us (Britain) or against us. She made it a point that to question power and privilege as a root cause of social disparities would only make you an enemy of the state. Not the state's fault. Your fault. You are free to dream, free to succeed in a cage. Not our fault you can't break free.

You were in or out. Immigrants, well, those of colour and/or those who spoke a different language, were out. You want in? Shut up, be happy. Be grateful that Britain has given you a safe place, safe from the police, safe working conditions, safe housing.

NO WIN RACE

Safe. You are here because we saved you, not because you are helping the British economy, not because of slavery, not because the Empire had left your country in ruins through colonialism. Don't worry about the fact that Britain compensated the slavers and not the enslaved, justified oppression in the name of God, in the name of science, in the name of the arts.

I had for many years understood that for any outsider Britain would always promise more than it could deliver. You achieved despite the system, not because of it. Yet the eighties appeared to make an already unequal society even more unfair, even more divided.

Later that evening, while reading *Handa's Surprise** to my son, Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller's *Joy in People* exhibition popped into my head. At London's Hayward Gallery I had seen, amid the colours and the quirks, amid the joy and the pain, the joy in pain, images of the Miners' Strike and police brutality. It brought the eighties back to me again and revealed just how many people across the UK Thatcher had displeased. Yet she remained in power for such a long time. Three election victories, remember? Impressive. Why did so many people vote for someone deemed so divisive? Must have found a way to appeal to the true blue within, right? Must have played patriotic games better than any other politician. Enough, therefore, for people to forget what the policies and the economy had really been doing to them all along.

* *Handa's Surprise* is an illustrated children's book, set in southwest Kenya. Handa is taking fruit to her friend Akeyo in a basket on her head. One by one, various animals take a piece of fruit from her basket without Handa realising. Will she have any fruit left by the time she finally sees Akeyo?

INTRODUCTION

Suddenly I felt guilty and anxious. How could I let Thatcher interfere with this moment with my son? She had already interfered with my childhood. How could such feelings that I thought I had long since buried resurface so swiftly? The thoughts came, they went. They hurt. They died. Like my soul.

My soul finds solace in sport and indeed the success of black athletes. Rio Ferdinand on a football field, as smooth as Rakim on the mic. Lennox Lewis, an under-appreciated champion despite being Britain's greatest post-war boxer. Ian Wright, the working-class hero who taught everyone that you could succeed with hard work and without compromise. Anthony Joshua, Denise Lewis and Jessica Ennis-Hill, each winning with class. Lewis Hamilton, winning with style. Well, not just winning but transcending. He may be British sport's GOAT (greatest of all time). Don't care about their politics. Or how they self-identify. I need sport like I need friendships. I need to see those positive images, because it always feels as if they represent something more than athletic excellence. They represent you. The best of you; the *you* that the media and history tend to ignore, deny, conceal, suppress, revile.

The reality for people of colour in Britain is that our skin tone is a barrier. It limits opportunities. Things have improved. But for all the success displayed on the field of play, black people remain the poor relations in British society. We are still over-represented in the criminal justice system, in unemployment, in mental health institutions, in school exclusions. We remain absent in positions of power, around decision-making tables, in government. The black athlete may often be triumphant, they may create an illusion that we make up a more significant

NO WIN RACE

percentage of the population, but some gross disparities still exist in Britain for black people.

For all our success on the playing field, it is still hard for me to use the word 'we' and 'us' when referring to my place of birth. Why? Because in so many British people's eyes, we (black people) remain outsiders, visitors, not the ideal conception of Britishness or Englishness. As a friend once said to me, 'I only feel English when I'm abroad.' Another friend recently said to me, 'The only time I've ever seen true diversity on television was during the coverage of the Grenfell disaster.' So, while sport provides a remedy in the form of positive images of black people, does this also mask society's deep-rooted rejection and ignorance of Black-Britishness? Can blackness and Britishness ever be compatible?

This book aims to answer these questions. Primarily covering the period between the Brixton Riots (1981) and the Brexit referendum (2016), it looks at 'race' and racism in modern Britain through the prism of sport. It explores sport's role in reflecting, reinforcing or challenging common ideologies about 'race'.

I use the West Indies cricket team to explore the conflict of supporting colour (shared experiences) over your country (shared birthplace), I look at how London 2012 concealed the racial tensions of the time, I examine the Americanisation of Black-British culture through Michael Jordan and the re-emergence of athlete activism. I profile some of our major sporting heroes such as Lewis Hamilton, Eniola Aluko and Ian Wright. I also revisit major sporting events, such as Lennox Lewis *v.* Frank Bruno and some of our major sporting conflicts, like Linford Christie *v.* Lord Coe, and John Terry *v.* Anton and Rio Ferdinand. In each case, I

INTRODUCTION

uncover what these athletes and these events told me about 'race' relations in modern Britain.

This is not a *history of*, or a who's who, of black people in British sport. It does not attempt to cover every single event and every single athlete. Nor is this an academic study of 'race' relations through sport even if, at times, it draws on the excellent work of scholars such as Ben Carrington and Kevin Hylton. This is personal, telling true stories from a black perspective, my perspective, one informed by having worked as a journalist and in civil society for over 25 years. One informed by having loved sport practically all my life, because it is something that has bonded three generations of males in my family.

I cannot be saved. It will always be this way for me. Enraged, caged. Frustrated. Frustrated knowing that 'race' does not exist. Knowing it is a social construct. One of the biggest lies in history. That is why I refer to 'race' in this way. Cannot give it credence. Yet it is real: real in the minds of people, real in history, real in the way it equates Britishness to whiteness. The Empire state of mind.*

My partner once said to me, the only thing that exists is the way people see 'race'. See me. Limit me. I'm frustrated knowing that Britishness for many people isn't blackness. Well, Britishness nor Englishness isn't blackness. I veer between the two. My experience, the experiences in this book, are English. But the Empire state of mind is British.

Yet for him, my son, 'race' will affect his life chances. For him, my son, the playing field will also look extremely different to

* 'Empire State of Mind' was a song performed by Jay-Z featuring vocals by Alicia Keys. In the song, 'Empire State' means New York. Here, the West Indies exposed the fragility of the British Empire.

NO WIN RACE

mine. He does not see colour. But people see his colour. As he gets older, those perceptions of his colour will become more vivid, more twisted, more restrictive.

So how do I prepare him for a society that, on the surface, is great, functions well, provides opportunities; a society I am glad to be in, yet I also understand will disadvantage him due to the colour of his skin? How should I impart knowledge without sinking his confidence? How do I achieve this without giving him my baggage, without afflicting? Without infecting?

How and when exactly do you tell a child that so much of what they will hear in school and read in newspapers is only half the truth; not our truth but a clouded, colour-blind version of the truth? How do I give him the confidence to fight when everyone around him will think that you can't win with 'race', that the only race you can win is on the playing field?

I often struggle to convey this to my white friends with children. We all have our problems. We all have our issues. I understand that. But I also know that they will never have to worry about whether their children will be welcome in some neighbourhoods or not. My white friends are unlikely to teach their kids about how to deal with the police, because their child will less likely be profiled and stopped without reason. They will not have to instruct their kids about the way they walk, through fear that this may reflect badly on how their behaviour is perceived. They will not have to worry about their child wearing a hoodie or having their child's athletic achievements being attributed to natural ability. They will not have to worry about their child being exposed to an overwhelming number of negative images in the media or having any academic failure implicitly attributed to

INTRODUCTION

‘race’. They will never have to edit their child’s assertiveness in public through fear of their child being perceived as angry or aggressive. They will not have to prepare them for multiple taxis driving past them, low expectations and stereotypes from teachers, or multiple clubs, restaurants and bars refusing them entry. It is unlikely that their children will ever be mistaken for ‘the help’ at fancy gatherings. They will not have to worry about how ‘race’ is represented in school, or if their history is non-existent in textbooks. They will not have to worry about their child’s skin being a determining factor around whether an employer thinks s/he can fit in or not, or whether they are deemed suitable for housing. They will not have to prepare their child for a society where white folks will continually explain how you (as a black person) should feel about racism.

My father grew up in the era of West Indian batsman Collie Smith, under colonial rule where the divides in society and on the playing field were written in the law. I grew up in the John Barnes era under Thatcherism, where the violence of racism enabled me to see how discrimination made the playing field uneven. My son is growing up in the Anthony Joshua era where the uneven playing field is not quite so clear, not quite so blatant, but the impact on black people remains overwhelmingly negative.

How, then, do you prepare your children for a society where they will be sent ‘to the crease, only for them to find, as the first balls are being bowled, that their bats have been broken before the game ...’¹