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Jon Entine. *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*. New York: Public Affairs, 2000. 387 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-891620-39-3.

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## The Dominance Effect: A Review of Jon Entine's *Taboo*

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If one were to follow women's professional tennis over the past year or two, without any sense of the sport's history, one could easily conclude that Venus and Serena Williams, two African-American teenagers formerly of Compton, CA, were dominating the sport. Although they did not come up through the junior circuit (as did most of their peers), and although they received unconventional training from their father, Richard, for much of their short professional careers, the sisters have achieved unparalleled success in the sport: in 1999, Serena won the U.S. Open championship, and in 2000 Venus won both the Wimbledon and U.S. Open finals. Yet, aside from these two women, and newcomer Alexandra Stevenson (who is half-black and half-white, but considers herself "white"), tennis is overwhelmingly and pristinely white, from the players, to the coaches, down to the commentators.

This myopic view prevails among most sports observers, as well as many professional sports journalists, like Jon Entine, author of the controversial book, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It*. Looking solely at (recent) winners (e.g., Venus and Serena Williams) and not at the overarching social structure (e.g., the lily-white tennis establishment) that manages to filter out a great number of minority participants, Entine and others mistake Venus and Serena's dominance, or wins, as a symbol of power and authority. This uncontested notion of black

"dominance" obscures several realities about black participation in sports. While Venus and Serena may rent the house, they surely don't own it. Ultimately, the entire debate points to a fear and paranoia about race in a broader context, outside of athletics.

Although *Taboo* consists of a whopping 340 plus pages (not including end notes), its thesis is simple and altogether unoriginal: "[blacks] dominate certain athletic events because they have innate skills peculiar to that sport and that social and cultural factors exaggerate these crucial differences" (pp.vii). Entine argues that blacks of West African descent—a group which includes African Americans—have a greater jumping and running capacity than their non-African counterparts, making them more likely to excel in the three sporting events of basketball, football and sprinting. He points out that male black East Africans, particularly Kenyans, hold the majority of world running records in long-distance events. Again, he attributes their success to "bio-cultural" factors whereby "cultural conditions exaggerate the small but meaningful differences that led to the athletic edge" (pp. 279). This thesis begins to unravel when we consider that there are a host of other sports that require speed, jumping and endurance (volleyball, gymnastics, and, yes, tennis, to name only a few), which are dominated by white athletes in this country. Entine also ignores the fact that black Africans do not overwhelmingly excel in basketball, which is a so-called "black" sport.

But we might never mind these details. Entine has

a point to prove, and no counter-argument—however large or significant—will detract him. Unfortunately, the book’s structure also does not live up to the weight of its subject matter: for instance, *Taboo* also includes a sweeping history of race and eugenics, bashes the so-called East German “Sports Machine,” and providing a historical overview of African-American men in sports history for those readers who have not read Arthur Ashe’s more nuanced three-volume set, *A Hard Road to Glory*. Entine neglects to comment on this material. Consequently, his book contains fillers and padding, further highlighting how weak his argument really is. Entine also makes poor use of scientific evidence, particularly when he points out that “black” babies are more likely than their “white” counterparts to become athletically skilled adults. Because he is interested in race as a biological phenomenon and not a cultural construct, he groups African Americans and Africans in the same category, and shamefully ignores major differences such as in prenatal care, healthcare, and diet. In fact, according to the following quote from a 1957 study referenced in Entine’s book, blacks should be superior to whites in all things: “The motor development was greatly in advance of that of European infants of the same age. It was paralleled by advanced adaptability, language, and personal social behavior” (pp. 250).

With so much in favor of the black athlete, what is there to complain about? The author agrees and cheerily states early on in the text that *Taboo*’s only “real” message is not to spread racist ideology but to acknowledge and celebrate human diversity. Yet Entine’s language betrays another agenda: in a description of record-setting long distance performances, Kenyan “dominance” too easily becomes Kenyan “hegemony” (pp. 38), which, by definition, implies that these superior East Africans have imposed their will and their ideology over subordinate athletes, namely whites. The offhand way that Entine interchanges these terms allows the reader to forget that white British imperialism in Kenya nurtured athletics to “tame” the African natives. The athletes themselves have little power in comparison.

Additionally, black dominance in certain sports slips into an overall athletic supremacy. Entine claims that “blacks are starring in disproportionate numbers in almost all sports (emphasis mine), not just those requiring running or jumping” (pp. 337). He later asserts that “black domination of sports is so pronounced that a kind of reverse racism has set in” whereby white athletes are

marginalized and assumed to be inferior. He exemplifies this point by including this observation from a black football player, “There weren’t too many coaches that would give a white guy a chance at corner [back]” without properly noting that blacks were and are often steered, engineered or “stacked” at this position because it is assumed that they are faster than whites (pp. 331).

Describing himself as curious, but not racist, Entine would like for the reader to believe that because he is interested in science, his argument has no political or ideological motivation. He puts his faith in race scientists whose views, he maintains “are not racist but are in the best tradition of science: objective and value neutral conclusions” (p. 219). But the author does not explain why his argument does not follow in the tradition of the racist eugenics studies of the late 1800s and early 1900s that he painstakingly details and describes. What makes it OK to trust race science at the beginning of the 21st century when the 19th century studies were “obviously” misguided? Today’s scholars, according to Entine, are too wedded to non-confrontational political correctness and are dishonest about race relations, choosing instead to overlook, elide and ignore racial differences. Says Entine, no one talks about race anymore because we now believe that exposing racial differences in itself is a racist practice. Here Entine craftily borrows the language and posture of anti-racist intellectuals. He fails to recognize his own white privilege—one which allows him to play the so-called “race card” in instances when whites as a group appear to be at a disadvantage.

In this post-race era, minorities are accused of exploiting race whenever they point out social, economic and political inequities in healthcare, standardized test scores, wages and the like.

When explaining the faults of late nineteenth century Social Darwinism, Entine reminds us “social theories do not emerge in a social vacuum” (pp. 125). Likewise, *Taboo* must be properly contextualized within its historical timeframe. When one considers the wider social and historical context of this paranoia over the dominant global black athlete and the seemingly disappearing white male, we should be mindful that in the United States, minorities’ birth rates are quickly outpacing whites, and that affirmative action policies have substantially increased access to education, housing and jobs for minorities and women. Despite the author’s good intentions, *Taboo* makes clear that sports now represent another lost frontier for white men.

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