

BOOK REVIEW

Boston sports has a mixed history on race, but the untold stories sing

A new book takes a look at some of the Hub's lesser-known athletic heroes.

By Louis Moore



Robert Cvornyek (left) and Doug Stark with the cover to their book, “Race and Resistance in Boston.” Robert Cvornyek/Doug Stark/University of Nebraska Press

The Bruins were the first NHL team to play a Black player ([Willie O’Ree](#)); the Celtics were the first NBA team to draft a Black player ([Chuck Cooper](#)), and they were also the first team to hire a Black coach ([Bill Russell](#)). But Boston is also the city that the legendary Russell called a “flea market for racism,” and the Red Sox, who were the last MLB team to integrate when they inserted Pumpsie Green into the lineup in 1959, have had to reckon with their reputation as a racist organization. (In 2018, the Red Sox got the city of Boston to [rename the street](#) outside Fenway Park to remove its association with former owner Tom Yawkey.)

In the shadows of these histories, however, lie great sports stories of everyday Black Bostonians who forged their own sporting traditions under prejudiced conditions. “[Race and Resistance in Boston: A Contested Sports History](#),” edited by Robert Cvornyek and Douglas Stark, brings together 15 chapters from a host of writers studying a bevy of Boston sports and Black athletes from the end of the Civil War to present day. While there are

chapters focusing on big names like Bill Russell and boxer “Marvelous” Marvin Hagler, most of the book’s contributors highlight overlooked local stories, like that of tennis trainer Jim Smith, who mentored thousands of kids from Dorchester at the Franklin Field Tennis Center.

Cricket is part of this overshadowed history. In the early 20th century, Black Bostonians made their mark in the elite English game. As Violet Showers Johnson tells readers in her excellent chapter, “In Pursuit of the Boundary,” these Black cricketers were often referred to as the “other Blacks” because of their West Indian roots and their desire to play cricket, a sport many considered “white.” As early as 1898, they formed their first cricket club, and within five years the Boston Globe predicted they would dominate the game. The Globe was right. By the 1920s, it was widely known in cricket circles that the Black players from Boston were some of the best cricketers in the state. Playing the egalitarian integrated game gave these immigrants a sense of hope, and a space for community. After World War II, however, the game lost its appeal to a younger generation that would rather pursue more Americanized sports like baseball and basketball.

Boston’s Black community, historian Robert Cvornyek tells us, caught the baseball bug early. The first significant Black club, the Boston Resolutes, formed in 1870 and battled Black teams throughout New England. The Resolutes, and the city, had such a reputation for ball that in 1887 when Black baseball entrepreneurs made the first attempt at an all-Black league, the National Colored League tapped the Resolutes as a key franchise. Unfortunately, the NCL failed within a few weeks. But Black baseball in Boston continued to thrive. In 1903, for example, local Black players started their own amateur league, the Great Boston Colored League. And although Boston never hosted a team in any of the Black leagues that Major League Baseball considers “major,” local teams like the Tigers, who dominated in the 1920s, and the Colored Giants, who owned the local diamonds in the 1940s, left their mark on America’s game and their community well before the Braves (1950) and Red Sox (1959) integrated.

In the 1960s, however, with MLB integration destroying the [Negro Leagues](#), and the Red Sox’ reputation as a racist team fully entrenched, many local Black youngsters turned to hoops as their game of choice. It helped that the Celtics were in the middle of their eleven-championship run propelled by Black stars like Bill Russell and Sam Jones. By 1972, with the creation of the nationally known Shootout tournament for high school hoopers, journalist Bijan C. Bayne tells readers, Boston became a hotbed for college recruiters.

But until 1974 and the forced busing decision to integrate schools, Black basketball was largely hidden from a wider white Boston audience. Over the next four decades, white students fled the public schools in large numbers. In the meantime, tons of Black talent, including from new immigrant communities, flowed in. The best was [Patrick Ewing](#), who emigrated from Jamaica at the age of 13. Ewing fell under the tutelage of coach Mike Jarvis at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. Jarvis, who would go on to make waves as a top-notch college coach in the 1990s, turned Ewing into a high school all-American before he went on to star at Georgetown on his way to becoming a Hall of Famer. Ewing's path to stardom paved the way for locals like guard Dana Barros, who followed him to the NBA.

Today the Celtics are known as a forward-thinking organization. In 2013, Celtics center [Jason Collins](#) became the first professional male athlete to publicly come out as gay, largely because he felt comfortable in that organization, and in that city. The NBA franchise is also at the forefront of providing opportunities for Black women coaches and executives. The Celtics hired [former WNBA player Kara Lawson](#) as an assistant coach in 2019 (Lawson left to become head coach of the Duke women's basketball team), and today they employ Allison Feaster as a VP in the front office. Lawson, Feaster, and the Celtics are paving a way for a generation of women to make their mark in the sporting world.

Overall, "Race and Resistance in Boston" has something for every local sports lover who is also conscious about justice. These compelling stories about race, class, and sexuality add to Boston's legacy as a city of deep cultural and sports history.

RACE AND RESISTANCE IN BOSTON: A Contested Sports History

Edited by Robert Cvornyek and Douglas Stark

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Louis Moore is the author of "[The Great Black Hope: Doug Williams, Vince Evans, and the Making of the Black Quarterback](#)."