

Historica Canada Education Portal

Black Canadians in Sport

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprints videos [Ferguson Jenkins](#), Harry Jerome, Donovan Bailey, and the '96 4x100m relay team. These athletes are a source of national pride, but their achievements also hastened Canada's confrontation with its past and present prejudices.

Aims

To increase student awareness of Black Canadian athletes' contribution to Canadian sport; to study the history of Canada as the history of Black Canadians' experiences; to encourage a critical understanding of the particular challenges Black Canadian athletes have faced and continue to encounter today; and to assess the extent to which those challenges reflect larger social prejudice in Canadian society.

Background

In 1605, Mathieu Da Costa accompanied Samuel de Champlain to Acadia, where he was establishing a settlement. The Azores native knew the Mi'kmaq language and acted as the French explorer's interpreter. He was a traveller of the Atlantic world in the late 1500s and early 1600s,

sought by both the French and Dutch to act as translator on voyages to North America. He is also documented as the first known person of African descent to set foot on Canadian soil and is an intriguing figure, both because of what we know and don't know about his life. Our general understanding and awareness of the history of Black Canadians is also filled with such confusion. The Underground Railroad is an historical buoy for Canadians, a chapter in the log of African Canadians we feel comfortable with and even proud to remember. The resilience of this episode, however, can in large part be explained by how it separates us from our allegedly less tolerant neighbours to the south. We saved Africans; they enslaved them. Our history is relatively benign; theirs is bloody and brutal. The historical record, of course, tells a different story. And the stories of African Canadian athletes tell of the complex record that is our nation's past.

The "peculiar institution" of slavery commonly linked with the American South, perhaps surprisingly, had arms extending into eighteenth-century New France. Rules and regulations governed the ownership, management and emancipation of Aboriginals and black slaves, which ensured that by the end of the French Regime in 1763, there were about 3,500 slaves in New France, of which perhaps 1,100 were black.

Between 1700 and 1810, British merchants were also active in the slave trade, transporting almost three million Africans across the Atlantic. But in the space of 26 years, between 1787 and 1833, Britain not only outlawed the slave trade but also abolished slavery throughout its colonial possessions, including the area soon to be called Canada. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the Atlantic slave trade continued to flourish, most notably in the United States, until the victory of the North in the American Civil War in 1865. The underground railway flourished during the final years of American slavery, making Canada both a destination

and a symbol of salvation for those of African descent.

Canada's role as the final stop in the long run from US slave owners is again one of the facts in our history for which we are justifiably proud. And yet even in the early twentieth century, intolerance towards Black Canadians was not uncommon north of the 49th parallel. In fact, during the Great War, after two years in the morass and brutality of trench-scarred European battlefields, Canada declined to accept African Canadians as equally free people. Indeed, the General Headquarters in Ottawa issued the following memorandum in April 1916:

Nothing is to be gained by blinking facts, the civilized negro is vain and imitative; in Canada he is not impelled to enlist by a high sense of duty; in the trenches he is not likely to make a good fighter; and the average white man will not associate with him on terms of equality.... In France, in the firing line, there is no place for a black battalion, C.E.F., it would be eyed askance; it would crowd out a white battalion; and it would be difficult to re-inforce.... No white officer would accept an all black platoon.

Years of war and carnage also seemed to ferment little change to racial policy in the Royal Air Force in Canada. Twenty-four year old Harold Leopold Bell of Jamaica voluntarily enlisted in the R.A.F and was sent to Camp Sussex in New Brunswick as the First World War was drawing to a close. On 21 August 1918, however, he was barred from joining the war effort as an R.A.F. mechanic. Instead, he was given his discharge papers because he was listed as "Complexion - Dark."

By the time of Adolph Hitler's Blitzkrieg, enough barriers had been broken down for blacks to serve with the Royal Canadian Air Force. And while this proved a major advance both for the Air Force and for Canada's war

effort, black soldiers returning from tours of duty during the 1940s were still struck by the hypocrisy underlying Canada's fight against fascism in Europe. While this fight went on soldiers noted that bigotry still ruled the day on the home front. The racism in Canada was as veiled as a sign reading, "No Blacks." For example, in 1946, Viola Desmond, a black businesswoman, refused to sit in the balcony of a New Glasgow, Nova Scotia theatre. Instead, she sat below in an area designated exclusively for whites, prompting her arrest for violating seating policies. This was almost ten years before Rosa Parks boarded a bus for home in Montgomery, Alabama and remained seated after being ordered to give up her seat to a white passenger. African Canadians were refusing to stay in the background with or even before African Americans.

Although Canada did not adopt a systematic system of Jim Crow laws like the United States, it did allow for voluntary *de facto* racial segregation. Many communities across Canada followed the example of Dresden, Ontario, where racial segregation was practiced in virtually all public places. The provinces of Nova Scotia and Ontario allowed public schools to be segregated along racial lines until the 1960s. Black Canadians in Ontario had to wait until 1964 for segregation to be declared illegal, bringing an end to racially separated classrooms in the province.

It was into this milieu that Ferguson Arthur Jenkins, the only Canadian to enter the Baseball Hall of Fame in the twentieth century, was born on 13 December 1943 in Chatham, Ontario. By the time Jenkins entered the major leagues in 1965, black baseball players filled the league across the continent; however, to reach this point required the dismantling of barriers that had prevented non-white athletes from playing in the major leagues for generations. As we know today, some of these barriers would come down first in Canada.

What is often called America's pastime has indelible roots in Canada. Cooperstown, New York, home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, claims to be the birthplace of the first recorded game of baseball in its modern form in the summer of 1839. Interestingly, Canadians, among others, argue that the community of Beachville, Ontario saw the first pitch in baseball history. On 4 June 1838, the local Beachville Club, playing a game with a ball of double twisted woolen yarn covered with calfskin took on a club from the nearby township of Zorra and North Oxford in honour of King George IV's birthday. This date was chosen because it had been declared a national holiday in celebration of the overthrow of the Rebellion of 1837 a year earlier. While debate may continue over where baseball began, there is little question that the early years of America's pastime were intimately linked with questions of race.

The official "colour line" in baseball was drawn on December 11, 1868 when the National Association of Baseball Players voted unanimously to bar "any club which may be composed of one or more colored persons." More than 70 years later this line would still be in place, until a Montreal night in 1946 when the remarkable Jackie Robinson would break the barrier and change baseball forever. At the time, Montreal was considered one of the most cosmopolitan and tolerant cities in North America. Playing in this setting on April 18, Jackie Robinson stepped onto the field at Delorimier Stadium with the Montréal Royals of the International League, a Triple-A minor league affiliate of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Initially accepting but disinterested, French Canadians came to deem Robinson a city hero, seeing in him a reflection of their own struggle for recognition. When the Royals won the Little World Series that year, defeating Louisville from the American Deep South, crowds serenaded Robinson in French with the cry, "Il a gagné ses épaulettes." ("He has earned his stripes.")

Almost two decades later, the two metre Fergie Jenkins entered the major leagues with the Philadelphia Phillies. Memorably, his first pitch came close enough to Dick Groat that it threw him on his back. The next three just caught the side of the plate - harbingers of the pinpoint delivery for which Jenkins is remembered. He later told a *Sports Illustrated* reporter that he did not endorse the sort of pitch that inaugurated his 14-season career. "I figure if a pitcher wants to go headhunting," he explained, "he should play hockey instead of baseball."

His 284 wins over 19 years in the Majors are the most for a black Major League Baseball pitcher. In a game obsessed with statistics, his impressive numbers are the more so considering where he pitched - six celebrated seasons with the Chicago Cubs at Wrigley Field, the smallest and most hitter friendly ballpark in Major League Baseball, and two seasons in Boston Red Sox's Fenway Park, known as a hitter's friend. With a 150 kilometre per hour fastball that moved in the strike zone and a hard-to-hit slider, Cubs catcher Randy Hundt explained, "Jenkins was a dominant pitcher I could have caught with a pair of pliers." Jenkins is the only pitcher in major league history with over 3,000 strikeouts and less than 1,000 walks lifetime. His control was what made him not one of the best black pitchers of the modern game, but one of the best pitchers, no qualification attached.

Ray Lewis, born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1910, was one of the fastest runners of his generation and he was the first Canadian-born black athlete to stand on the Olympic podium. The great-grandson of slaves, he worked as a porter on the railway and trained by running alongside the tracks when the train was stopped on the Prairies. It would be an historical conceit if Harry Jerome, also an African Canadian and a railway porter, had witnessed Lewis fleeting past Saskatchewan wheat fields.

After all, on 30 September 1940, Jerome's wife Elsie gave birth to one of the greatest sprinters Canada has ever produced. Born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Harry Jerome Jr. would grow up to be one of the world's fastest humans. But what separated Jerome from the rest of the field was his determination as an athlete, as a scholar, and as a man who consistently questioned the country's attitudes about race.

When Jerome was 12, his family moved to North Vancouver. They settled in a conservative neighbourhood, whose black population numbered exactly seven - Jerome, his four siblings and his mother and father. Jerome caught the attention of a track coach at North Vancouver High School as he ran the bases in a baseball game.

On 15 July 1960, running at a meet in Saskatoon for the University of Oregon, Jerome set the world record of 10.0 seconds in the 100 metres. But Olympic gold eluded him - his best a bronze in Tokyo in 1964. Nonetheless, glistening gold pales in comparison to the gleam of his grit. Two years previously, at the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth, Australia, Jerome completely severed his left quadriceps muscle. He could thrust his entire fist into the indentation in his thigh, and there was some doubt he would ever walk properly again. Running in Tokyo two years later, the 30-centimetre scar on his thigh was testament to a determination that recalls the namesake for his middle name. Jerome's father so admired the British Prime Minister Churchill and his dogged defiance of the German Air Force during the London blitz that he had chosen Winston for his son.

Given Jerome's success and perseverance, it's odd to note that the Canadian media consistently bombarded Jerome with negative press, labelling him a quitter on several occasions. Nevertheless, his voice for social change was not muffled. Instead, Jerome used his athletic

achievements to create opportunities for Black Canadians beyond sports and was a vocal opponent of the misrepresentation or absence of Black Canadians in the Canadian media.

Jerome retired from active competition in 1968, still running some of the best times of his career. Continuing his dedication to education, he worked several years for Sports Canada and set up the Premier's Sports Awards program to encourage sport and fitness at the elementary school level. On 7 December 1982, riding across Vancouver's Lion's Gate Bridge, Jerome suffered a brain seizure and died on the way to hospital. Canada and the University of Oregon have since memorialized him with statues, recreational facilities, and track and field competitions. Jerome never ran from his status as a role model for Black Canadians, and our nation is so much the better because of his time here.

If the Canadian media was often hostile towards Harry Jerome, it adored another Canadian sprinter at the Olympics in Atlanta. Canadians caught their collective breath on 27 July 1996 when Donovan Bailey broke the tape at the XVI Olympiad. After 9.84 gut wrenching and muscle-twitching seconds, a Canadian became the fastest man in the world. Again. In less than ten seconds, Bailey had left behind his competition and also an eight-year scarlet letter emblazoned on the maple leaf. When Bailey took the giant Canadian flag from the woman sitting in the front row of Olympic Stadium at the Centennial Olympiad, the smudge of Ben Johnson's positive drug test at the 1988 Seoul Olympics was rinsed from the nation's collective consciousness.

Bailey is now part of how we imagine ourselves, and in part, to our own shame, we have worked to remove Johnson from our concerns. We clutch the former to our chest as passionately as we shove the latter from our memories. We also hold to misguided notions of national identity.

Speaking with *Montréal Gazette* writer Michael Farber for a *Sports Illustrated* article, Bailey commented on the intolerance of Canada: "We know it exists. People who don't appear to be Canadian - people of colour - don't get the same treatment. They associated you with your parents' birthplace or your birthplace." When we recall the Underground Railroad, we must not forget the intolerance that awaited its travelers. The spiritual song from the nineteenth century, "Follow the Drinking Gourd," reads:

**So long old Master,
Don't come after me,
I'm heading north to Canada
Where everyone is free.**

Eight days after Bailey's win, on 4 August, Robert Esmie, with "Blast Off" shaved on his head, broke from the starting blocks. Less than eleven seconds later, Glenroy Gilbert took the baton. After 9.02 seconds, Bruny Surin took it. Finally, 9.25 seconds afterwards, Bailey extended Canada's 4 x 100 metre relay team's lead and in 8.95 seconds, arm raised, Bailey brought another gold home for Canada. Amid the whoops of victory from his teammates and Canadians everywhere, Bailey apologised. The winning time was 37.69 seconds, a Canadian record, but 19/100ths off the world mark of 37.40. Bailey and the rest of the 4 x 100 metre relay team had nothing to be sorry for as their medals glistened as brightly as a Prairie field of golden wheat.

The landscape of Canada has changed since Mathieu Da Costa first set foot on Canadian soil. But the contribution of Black Canadians to the development of the nation and its history has been constant.

Activities

1. Different Track than the Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad is a story that links Canadians to the painful history of slavery in the United States, and separates us from the history that Americans struggle with today. The story of Africville, however, belies the lack of accountability that Canadians may feel. This twentieth century episode in Canadian history is the story of urban removal in Canada and how a black community within the city of Halifax was phased out of existence.

More recently, the history of Africville has been documented in a 1987 CBC production on the expulsion (clips of which can be [viewed online](#)). In 2002, the federal government finally declared Africville a national historic site. The City of Halifax has also commemorated where the community once stood.

In the midst of the American Civil War, Union General William T. Sherman issued a special Field Order granting "40 acres and a mule" for the resettlement of blacks. The grant was never met, and there has been continued debate in the United States about compensation for those who were affected and continue to be affected by the ravages of slavery. Talks regarding compensation for former Africville residents and its descendants however, are in their infancy. Currently, the reparation movement in Canada has fostered debate over the amount of payment, eligibility and the idea of compensation itself.

Students are to research the 150-year history of Africville. Recently published high school textbooks deal with the event, and there are excellent online resources on [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#). After completing their research, students are to write a 250-word essay

outlining the reasons for or against compensation for former Africville residents.

2. Map of migration

This exercise requires a map of the world that is large enough to be displayed for the entire class. Where do Black Canadians come from? In groups of two or three, students are to select one of the five Black Canadian athletes below and find out where they or their ancestors originally came from. Finally, each group is to plot the voyage of their athlete on a map of the world displayed at the front of the class. The five athletes are as follows:

- "Little Chocolate" George Dixon, the first black boxing champion in any class
- Willie O'Ree, the first Black athlete to play professional ice hockey in the National Hockey League
- Edmonton Oiler goaltender Grant Fuhr
- Jarome Iginla, the first black athlete to be named captain of an NHL team
- Perdita Felicien, who won the gold medal at the 2003 World Track & Field Championships in Paris, France

Students can also browse the [Passages Canada](#) story database to learn about other Black Canadians who have come to Canada.

3. Rewriting history

Textbooks can be divisive. How the history of a nation is taught to its children is naturally fraught with political, social and cultural implications.

It is therefore important for students to understand the biases of their own textbooks and how specific histories are told through each published edition.

Students are to look at the Table of Contents of their own social studies textbook. How is the text organised? What major stories are included? For example, does the textbook include Africville as an important episode in twentieth century Canadian history? What stories are omitted or given relatively little coverage? How much attention, if any, is given to Mathieu Da Costa in the story of Samuel de Champlain's arrival to the nation's shores? Students are then to rewrite the Table of Contents of their texts with a specific bias towards telling the story of Black Canadian athletes. They may organise the history of Canada chronologically, or perhaps they will decide that a theme-based organisational strategy is more informative.

4. Ben and Bailey

Canadians cried tears of disappointment and disillusionment when Ben Johnson tested positive for stanozolol, a banned anabolic steroid, at the XXIV Olympiad in Seoul, South Korea. We also cried tears of revelry and redemption when Donovan Bailey won gold in Atlanta. Johnson's transgression initiated a long look at Canadian athletics, culminating in the Commission of Inquiry into the use of Drugs and Banned Practices Intended to Increase Athletic Performance, better known as the Dubin inquiry after the presiding Justice, Charles Dubin. Bailey's success began an extended congratulatory back pat on the part of Canadians for the country's multicultural ethos. These two episodes in Canadians sporting history tell much about how the country imagines Black Canadians.

Distribute Canadian newspapers and magazines to students. Ask them to

identify and categorize stories, advertisements, and images concerned with Black Canadians. Discuss the prevalence of black Canadians in various categories. Is there a greater prevalence of Black Canadians in certain sections of the newspaper? How does the Canadian Media's portrayal of Black Canadians compare to the portrayal of other ethnicities? Is there a clear image or stereotyped conveyed?

5. There are many others...

There are many Black Canadian athletes not directly addressed in this series. Therefore, students are to research an African Canadian athlete not examined. Examples include boxing champion, "Little Chocolate" George Dixon; Willie O'Ree, the first Black athlete to play professional ice hockey in the National Hockey League; Edmonton Oiler goaltender Grant Fuhr; and Jarome Iginla, the first black athlete to be named captain of an NHL team. Using a hockey or baseball card as a template, students are to make a sports card for their chosen athletes. Images, statistics and the history of their black athlete should be included.

Resources

The Canadian Encyclopedia

[Black Canadians](#)

[African Canadians](#)

[Underground Railroad](#)

[Ferguson Jenkins](#)

[Harry Jerome](#)

[Donovan Bailey](#)

[In Conversation with Donovan Bailey](#)

[Bruny Surin](#)

Alexander, Ken and Avis Glaze. *Towards freedom : the African-Canadian experience*. Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1996.

Govia, Francine. *Blacks in Canada: in search of the promise*. Edmonton: Harambee Centres, 1988.

Racism Then and Now. [video] (CBC News in Review, October 2001)

Remember Africville. [video] (National Film Board of Canada, 1991)

Walker, James W. St. G. *A history of Blacks in Canada: a study guide for teachers and students*. 1980

Winks, Robin W. *The Blacks in Canada: A history*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997.