

# OBAMA'S SUCCESS: MUST HAVE BEEN THE SHOES BEFORE HIM

✖ America, indeed humanity, stands on the verge of a seminal moment in history. A turning point that inalienably alters our existence in so many ways, writ large and small, that it is hard to grasp. We are about to to inaugurate a black man, Barack Obama, President of the United States; a job that is still, despite all, the singularly most important and powerful position in the world. How did we get to this moment?

It is time to talk about race, and in a positive and constructive manner, not the sinister and tawdry below the surface baiting style so prevalent during much of the McCain/GOP campaign we just, thankfully, concluded. What has led us to the point where Barack Obama is about to give his first inaugural address; what paved the way for that? It just might, at least partially, be the shoes.

Specifically, the shoes worn by transcendental black athletes like Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Venus and Serena Williams and Arthur Ashe. Athletes not just dominant in their sport, but in sports that were previously the exclusive province of whites. In the case of Tiger, the Williams sisters and Arthur Ashe, it was their sports; sports that were once, and still remain, not just white, but elite. In Jordan's case, although in a sport long integrated, basketball, he became literally the face of the league and the most marketable and recognizable persona in advertising in the whole world.

One of the great gifts to sports journalism, really the literary field as a whole, in the last half century was the late Dick Schapp. A truly enlightened and renaissance man. One of the many enduring gifts Schapp left is a weekly sports roundtable discussion every Sunday morning on ESPN, *The Sports Reporters*. Not just

any sports reporters, but giants that, like Schapp, transcend the field of sports with a view of the larger frame of the world. Journalists like Mike Lupica, Mitch Albom and Bob Ryan. On the October 5, 2008 edition of *The Sports Reporters* John Saunders, who has led the *The Sports Reporters* since Schapp's untimely death, gave a fascinating parting shot (It is the approximately last two minutes of the linked podcast, which is very easy to fast forward to).

✖ Saunders' take was that Obama has had a surprisingly smooth and seamless run for the Presidential roses considering the historical context of black and white racial undertow of tension. Further, that one of the reasons for this is the way that certain black athletes, specifically Tiger Woods and Venus and Serena Williams have come to be the singular calling cards of their sports, golf and tennis respectively. Saunders posits that the significance is immense because both golf and tennis have been historically not just the domain of whites, although that they have been, but elite and powerful whites. The country club set; power brokers that really run things. Elegant and compelling individuals, Woods and the Williams; black in skin color, magnetic, inspirational and colorless champions in conduct and ethos.

We can all see, and appreciate, the progressive evolution of attitudes on race. We long have celebrated barrier breakers leading the way like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron. But Saunders is on to something here. Legendary agents of change are among us today, in their athletic prime, in the form of Tiger, Venus and Serena. Wonderful role models and avatars that have built upon the efforts of their racial predecessors, and are now able to be the leaders of their sports and societal symbols for who they are and what they have done, without the added characterization as "black". Tiger isn't black; Tiger is just Tiger. Same with the Williams sisters, they are just Venus and

Serena. This is a quite remarkable thing actually, something that even Muhammad Ali couldn't pull off; but Obama has been able to do it. Obama wasn't a black candidate; Obama was just a candidate. Barack Obama is not a black leader, he is our leader. Period.

✖ Outstanding. It's about time. This is real and tangible progress being built and expanded right in front of our eyes, and we should appreciate it as such. It is a transcendental and transformative moment.

As cogent as John Saunders' thoughts were, I would suggest that it should be taken one step further to really fill out this part of the racial progress story. In fairness to John, the parting shots on *The Sports Reporters* are just that; relatively brief quick takes, so he did not have the luxury of the extended format allowed here. The additional elements I would add are Arthur Ashe and Michael Jordan.

Ashe was really the progenitor of the color neutral athlete transcending his sport and impacting on the social conscience in the broader sense. Indeed, considering that he was operating in a far different and more volatile atmosphere two decades before even Jordan, Arthur Ashe may be the most remarkable of those discussed herein; his commitment to social justice, health and humanitarian issues left a mark on the world as indelible as his tennis was on the court. And as with the others, he did it with dignity and grace in a sport and stage that was exclusive and white.

Michael Jordan became simply the most recognizable and marketable personality in the world. Granted, not in a lily white country club sport such as golf or tennis, but Jordan's impact became so much more than simply his basketball. Never before had a black attained the iconic status of Michael Jordan, without still being categorized as "black". As with Tiger, Michael was simply Michael. To black and white, to rich and poor, to the powerful and the

powerless, he was just Michael. Must have been the shoes.

And the wonderful part is that the shift to color neutrality is not over; it is spreading like wildfire. The one picture above that most will not recognize is that of Lewis Hamilton, the newly crowned Formula One Grand Prix World Champion. This remarkable man, all of age 23, is the spitting image of a young Tiger Woods. If you think what Obama and Tiger have accomplished is earth shattering, picture this: A black youth from England, driving for a German team, winning across the globe and securing his championship in Brazil. Like the others, he is just Lewis. It is a beautiful thing.

We may not be there yet, but the promised land is starting to appear on the horizon. Dr. King may not have lived to see it, but we are getting closer and closer to the day where human beings "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character". So, in a time where there is so much war, death, hunger and financial despair, let us celebrate and give thanks for that which is remarkable and good in our midst.

Happy Thanksgiving Folks!