Journey to Gold: The Caribbean Psyche in Sports

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Abstract: Applying Eriksonian development theory to the development of physical and social competence, this article explores the journey to the gold for Jamaican and Caribbean athletes. Using illustrations from post-colonial literature and also illustrations from the lives of Jamaican athletes such as Usain Bolt and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, an exploration is made of how weak and prepubescent muscles become conditioned weapons aimed for gold. The article highlights the will to live developed through an encounter with a rival, and the resulting physical competence that is achieved. Through various individuals and groups affirming the athlete’s identity, continued support and victories are guaranteed. The article ends with the journey to the gold for Jamaican athletes who continue to compete for gold, and presents the medal haul for the sprint factory of the world – Jamaica.

Keywords: Jamaica, Sports, Caribbean Psyche, Eriksonian development, Olympics

I. INTRODUCTION

‘Now, son, don’t be a coward,’ his father coached him. ‘Stay there and fight. This is a man’s world. No dragon ever lasted forever. You are going to make your own kites now and I’ll help you. Not until you have downed the Dragon will you get another of Ramdeen’s kites.’

It was towards the end of the season during which Philip had lost no less than half a dozen kites to the Dragon. But he was now one of the regular brigades who had learned to take his beating. When he got down to the savannah the Dragon was already reigning in the air. It had the sky to itself and seemed to glory in its lone exaltation.

…Sombre-faced, Philip put up his kite. … He pulled on his thread hard to the left and he mounted, passing the Dragon swiftly. Then he tugged to the right. The red dived madly downwards. It was a wild, uncontrolled, vindictive thing. It was Philip up there, hating the boy with the freckle-face. It came swooping down by the Dragon, darted across, hesitated a little as its tail caught the Dragon’s thread, then continued plunging down to earth. The Dragon buckled in the sky then went spinning giddily, its tail looping over its thread, close to the kite, as if hiding its face. …

Philip twisted his mouth scornfully. He looked at his kite, gay in the wind, red as a wounded warrior, a wild, full-blooded thing. As it sang to the brave altitudes he could feel the vibration in the thread. He could match it against the best in the cage on Ramdeen’s door. Yes; he would match it with the best of them, both for beauty and cunning (Ramon-Fortuné, 1973, pp. 29-31).

Jamaica boasts of having the fastest man and the fastest woman in the world in athletics, Usain Bolt and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce. “In 75 years, Jamaica has won 38 Commonwealth Golds, 12 World Championship Golds and 13 Olympic gold medals in athletics alone” (JamaicanSprinters.com, 2016). This is no small feat, nor is it a case of sweat-less victory. Every Games scheduled for Rio, Brazil in 2016 has seen much commentary regarding Usain Bolt as the man to beat. It is discipline and team work among the athletes, the coaching staff, the medical professionals, and other administrative staff working alongside them that makes every event a success. Every medal, every international competition, has been a highly contested battleground. For a small nation in the world, sports personalities like Merlene Ottey, Herb McKinley, Bert Cameron, Donald Quarrie, Grace Jackson, Veronica Campbell-Brown, Keronn Stewart, Michael Frater, Nesta Carter, Novlene Williams-Mills, Alia Atkinson, the Reggae Boys, the Sunshine Girls, and so many others, have become household names around the world. This shows the value that the citizens of Jamaica, and the Government of Jamaica, place upon accomplishments in sports, as well as good sportsmanship (Observer, 2014).

This can only be so because athletics in, Jamaica, and by implication the wider Caribbean, becomes a metaphor for life. It is a safe and managed space in which would-be gold medalists have the opportunity to experience power and to take revenge against their rivals (Mitchell, 2015; Observer, 2014). As we consider the excerpt from “The Kite,” we see the father using his young son’s desire to fly a kite, with the older boys, as an opportunity to teach him about life and determination. Before Philip was seven years old, he had always wanted to be like the other boys in the savannah flying a kite. His father, knowing what went on out in the savannah and the skill that it took to fly a kite, had kept telling his son that he was too young for a kite. However, it was all that Philip
could dream about. He saw the kite and he saw himself out in the savannah flying his kite. He wanted it so badly that he dared to defy his parents and obtained the materials that he needed to make a kite, even daring to go into his mother’s linen closet to get material from one of her sheets. He would not be deterred. His parents were not amused by his behavior. However, his father was impressed with his determination and decided to give his young son the thing that he most wished. He bought him a kite at Ramdeen’s store. However, on the first day out, Philip’s kite string was cut by the Dragon’s tail and he ran home angry and embarrassed for what had happened. However, his father knew that this situation was more than just about Philip flying a kite. He wanted to use this desire to fly a kite and measure up to the older boys, especially the Dragon’s owner, as a foundation lesson for manhood and responsibility. So, he told Philip not to give up. He also issued Philip a challenge that he could not refuse. When Philip sends the Dragon spiraling down to the earth, he does it with the knowledge that he had faced his greatest fear and won. He had battled for the gold and taken it. His arms had worked for him; his strategy had served him well; and, his determination yielded results. Ultimately, Phillip had just enjoyed flying his kite and testing his strength and skill against those of the other boys in his community. It is this resolve, this resilience that has seen every great Jamaican athlete through to victory.

It is this aspect of resilience and its relationship to sports and athletic participation that is celebrated in the Caribbean. There is a long tradition of West Indies cricket. More recent sports include boxing, football which the rest of the world calls soccer, netball, basketball, hockey, tennis, gymnastics, swimming, and more. There are also other events which are held seasonally and attract international participation, namely, “horse racing, auto racing, seasonal bird shooting and regattas… ballooning and go-kart racing.” (Jamaican Embassy, 2016).

The Caribbean continues to be recognized for being a producer of excellent sportsmen and women. As the sprint capital of the world, Jamaica has also produced Asafa Powell, Juliet Cuthbert, Yohan Blake, and Warren Weir, in addition to the incomparable, Usain Bolt. We have even contributed to the success of other nations when our athletes compete for them, like, Ben Johnson (Canada, 1988), Linford Christie (England, 1992), and Donovan Bailey (Canada, 1996). Additionally, Jamaican or Caribbean parents have given birth to phenomenal American athletes such as, Sandra Farmer, Inger Miller and Marion Jones (SprintFactory.com, 2016). Historically, Jamaica has the prestigious honor of the most success per capita in track and field in the world. Since 1948, when Dr. Anther Wint won the first gold in 400mat the Olympics, and then he along with Herb McKenley, Leslie Laing and George Rhoden won the 4 x 400 relay in the 1952, Jamaica has never failed to be counted at the Olympics medal table (Jamaican Embassy, 2016; JamaicaSprinters.com, 2016; Observer, 2014).

On the list of great cricketers from the Caribbean are Garfield Sobers, Frank Worrell, Jeffry Dujon, Brian Lara, Christopher Gayle and many others. But where did they start? Many of these athletes had very humble beginnings, a metaphor for being raised in poverty-stricken environments. However, they had a love for sports that was discovered in their childhood, by a parent, a teacher, and ultimately a coach. Weak and prepubescent muscles may have challenged some of them. But, as they practiced and became more and more competent in form, in dexterity and in strategy, they managed to be selected by coaches for special teams. Each one earned their place on national and regional teams to represent their country or the region. In this article, we want to examine the developmental process related to sports in the Caribbean and the development of physical and social competence that allows the athletes to compete time and time again – win or lose. We will end by highlighting some of the successes that Jamaican athletes have attained on their journey to the gold, and present the medal haul for the sprint factory of the world – Jamaica.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Eriksonian Development and Athletic Ability

As athletic involvement involves muscular strength as well as cognitive capacities resulting in the confidence necessary to engage in sports, there are two Eriksonian developmental crises involved in relation to athletic competence. In the middle childhood and prepubescent period, the Eriksonian crisis to be resolved is industry versus inferiority. Due to the increasing development of muscular strength and coordination, children become more autonomous about exploring their environment and engaging in physical activities in middle childhood. Physical education programmes in many schools provide opportunities for children to learn the rules and fundamentals of organized sports in a safe and supervised manner. As they explore their physical limits with their peers they will discover interests in specific sports that may continue into adolescence. “According to Erikson, children who successfully resolve the psychological conflict of industry versus inferiority develop a sense of competence at skills and tasks, a positive but realistic self-concept, pride in accomplishment, moral responsibility, and the ability to work cooperatively with agemates” (Berk, 2010, p. 356). Therefore, teamwork and group
activities, on and off the field, provide the environment to develop any emerging athletic interests (See also Mitchell, Elias & Branche, 2015).

In adolescence, the Eriksonian crisis to be resolved is identity versus role confusion in which the adolescent makes a commitment to the sport as a part of their identity. However, there are many physical and cognitive changes that accompany such a process of identification with the sport. Consider the major physical changes that take place for girls and boys according to developmental psychologists.

Around age 8, girls start to add fat on their arms, legs, and trunk, a trend that accelerates between ages 11 and 16. In contrast, arm and leg fat decreases in adolescent boys. Although both sexes gain in muscle, this increase is much greater in boys, who develop larger skeletal muscles, hearts, and lung capacity (Rogol, Roemmich, & Clark, 2002). Also, the number of red blood cells – and therefore the ability to carry oxygen from the lungs to the muscles – increases in boys but not in girls. Altogether, boys gain far more muscle strength than girls, a difference that contributes to teenage boys’ superior athletic performance (Ramos et. al., 1998) (Berk, 2010, pp. 363-364).

Whereas the improvements in gross motor performance generally tapers off at age 14 for girls, boys enjoy an additional period of growth spurt throughout the teen years. During this growth spurt, “boys show a dramatic spurt in strength, speed and endurance that continues through the teenage years. By midadolescence, few girls perform as well as the average boy in running speed, broad jump, and throwing distance, and practically no boys score as low as the average girl (Haywood & Getchell, 2005; Malina & Bouchard, 1991)” (p. 364). Consequently schools will separate boys and girls for physical education classes and extracurricular sporting activities. Additionally, high school, students are introduced to an increasing number of sporting options – track and field, football, netball, basketball, table tennis, badminton, swimming, wrestling, and the like. In the United States, the sporting programmes tend to be more expansive than in the Caribbean including offerings in wrestling, tackle football, weight lifting, floor hockey, archery, tennis, and golf which are added to the curriculum (Berk, 2010).

In Jamaica, sports development continues at the secondary level through the famous Boys’ and Girls’ Championships. In general, Track and field is a part of the curriculum in most of the schools in Jamaica. The National Boys and Girls Championship (Champs') is an annual event held at the National Stadium in Kingston and is the premier event where athletes can showcase there talents. Winning athletes this event usually advance to represent Jamaica in national Penn Relays in Pennsylvania, USA, sometimes “dubbed” the Jamaican Relays because of the Jamaica's outstanding performance at this event (SprintFactory.com, 2016, paragraph 6).

In 2016 there were some major upsets among champion high school athletes that mirrored the type of situations that they will one day face as professional athletes. Many crowd favourites lost, and many underdogs took surprise victories, some even at the last stretch to the finish line. The school rivalry is always fierce (Mitchell, 2015). However, but the competition has gained international recognition and has been the scouting ground for colleges searching for their next star athlete.

In keeping with the Eriksonian psychosocial crisis and the commitment to an identity, boys who demonstrate a particular aptitude for a sport will incorporate that sport into their definitions of their core selves. Research has confirmed that “among boys, athletic competence is strongly related to peer admiration and self-esteem” (p. 364). Some adolescents are so desperate to outperform their competitors that they will turn to performance enhancing drugs in spite of the risks associated with their use and the anti-doping policies adopted by many sporting bodies” (Berk, 2010, p. 364). Although it may seem difficult to understand the importance of sports to these athletes, it is not just a passing interest and related only to the school’s physical education programme. Athletes learn much in terms of their social development from engaging in sports. Interschool and intramural activities provide important lessons in teamwork, problem solving, assertiveness, and competition. And regular, sustained physical activity is associated with lasting health benefits and enjoyment of sports and exercise.

Recently, a senior manager of a regional sanitation company in the Caribbean shared with his audience how his involvement in soccer gave him the confidence that he needed in other areas of his life; even influencing his ability to manage people today. He had always been short for his age and remained short into adulthood. However, he had a desire to be Jamaica’s number one goal keeper. Everyone, including his parents and his coach laughed at his dream. However, he would spend his lunch breaks playing with his friends, daring them to score a goal against him. Soon, only two out of every ten of his friends, would be able to score against him. He tried out for his high school team and became their premier goal keeper. His goal keeping skills were so noteworthy in the national football competitions that the journalist reporting on a critical match wrote three sentences about him. The match was horrible for his school. They in fact lost the match 6 to 0. However, the reporter noted that it could have been much worse had it not been for the remarkable skills of their goal keeper. He has treasured that article and still has it today. Now in his fifties, he watches his sons play sports. His dream was again realized in his older son who is...
over 6 feet tall, muscular, and went on to play as goal keeper for his high school team also; and even continues to play while in college.

Tammelin and colleagues (in Berk, 2010), discovered that participating in team or individual sports at age 14 at least once a week for girls and twice a week for boys predicted high physical activity rates at age 31. They also noted that relatively inexpensive endurance sports like running and cycling were especially likely to continue into adulthood. Additionally, “adolescent exertion during exercise, defined as sweating and breathing heavily, is one of the best predictors of adult physical exercise, perhaps because it fosters high physical self-efficacy – belief in one’s ability to sustain an exercise program ...” (p. 365). In the Caribbean, where poverty is a very prevalent issue, competence in sports may be the only way out of poverty for the athletes. Success in high school sporting competitions, as well as national and regional competitions, can oftentimes guarantee an athlete a scholarship. For example, one senior high school student who excelled as the most valuable player (MVP) for his soccer team, and also received the principal’s award for academic achievement, has recently completed a first degree at a leading American University through scholarship. He will continue to play soccer while pursuing his MBA in the next academic year. There was no way that he could have such opportunities before him had it not been for his scholarship. This is a similar story for many Caribbean nationals who have been recruited by American colleges. Several have gone on to earn higher degrees and have become medical doctors and college professors. Removing, the urgent and always present concerns of living such as meals, clothing, housing and school supplies allows athletes to focus on what is essential – academic success, athletic performance, and their future career and other life goals.

Resilience and Athletic Performance

Resilience simply means the ability to rebound; to experience defeat, absorb it, assess the loss and after assessing the possibilities, setting the experience of loss aside to make an amazing comeback that stuns self, as well as observers. According to Solomon (2013), in relation to sports,

Resilience is the ability to remain composed, confident, and consistent in the face of errors. A resilient athlete is one who can let go of errors and return to the present; s/he uses the error as an opportunity to learn and improve. The athlete who is not resilient will dwell on the mistake, be unable to stay in the present, and his/her performance will be inconsistent (Solomon, 2013).

Every athlete has to learn quickly that playing a sport involves the 50-50 risk of victory or defeat. If every trial on the field is for all or nothing, athletes have to face the reality that loss is guaranteed at least half of the time. However, for resilient athletes they have to find a way to improve their odds against loss; that is, to increase their chances for wins. Strengthening their core resilience is one way of improving their chances for success. According to Wagnild (2010), resilience is correlated to many variables related to physical and mental health. Her research revealed that “… resilience protects against (and reverses) depression, anxiety, fear, helplessness, and other negative emotions, and thus has the potential to reduce their associated physiological effects.” She identified five essential characteristics of resilience. They are:

1. Meaningful life (purpose): This involves “having a sense of one’s own meaning or purpose in life.”
2. Perseverance: This describes “the determination to keep going despite difficulties, discouragement, and disappointment.”
3. Self-reliance: “Self-reliance is a belief in yourself, with a clear understanding of your capabilities and limitations. It comes from experience and the ‘practice, practice, practice’ that leads to confidence in your abilities.”
4. Equanimity: This “means balance and harmony. Resilient people learn to avoid extreme responses and ‘sit loose in the saddle.’ Life is neither all good nor all bad.”
5. Coming home to yourself (existential aloneness): “It does mean that you must accept yourself as you are, warts and all (Wagnild, 2010).

Sports in the Caribbean

In Jamaica, the Government continues to make significant investments in the Institute of Sports (INSport). This is the organisation responsible for the development of sports locally. Additionally, at the community level, teams are facilitated in various local and regional competitions by the Social Development Commission (SDC). Over the years, the Government has continued to increase the base of participation in sporting activities beyond athletics. Some of the sports which they have added include volleyball, basketball and softball, in addition to football and netball (SprintFactory.com, 2016). No one can deny that Cricket is one of the most popular sports played in Jamaica, and the wider Caribbean. It was inherited from the English colonial rulers, and continues to be a favourite pastime today. In volatile communities, cricket, as well as other sports, serves as a unifying force.
Among Jamaicans. Through places like Boys Town, founded by the late Father Hugh Sherlock (Coke, 2002; Mitchell, in-press), many Jamaicans have excelled regionally and internationally in cricket including George Headley, Alfred Valentine, Jackie Hendricks, Collie Smith, Michael Holding, Jeffry Dujon and Courtney Walsh. Some even set records that are still memorable today. For example, in 1999, the leading wicket taker in West Indies cricket ended the Cable & Wireless series with a tally of 434 test wickets. History reveals that Jamaican, Courtney Walsh, is also the third highest wicket taker of all time (Jamaican Embassy, 2016). At the height of his career he served as Jamaica, West Indies and Gloucestershire captain.

Sports, in particular cricket in the Caribbean, can serve as a point of introduction to a new community. Imagine a young man who was without friends from the moment he arrived in the village. He had only his family – his ailing mother, stem father and older sister. Eventually, his mother died, his sister married and moved out, and his father went and got a new lady closer in age to his son than to himself. What does a young boy do who is left hanging in the balance by life? His only redemption was found when permission was given to him by his father to go and play cricket with the boys. He had never played before. He had only watched from the corners of the fields or from his porch. Now he was on the pitch and hitting the balls with all his might. It is the story behind Manick in Lovelace’s (2011), Is Just a Movie. Consider the following excerpt.

So it was at a time when his boyhood was nearly spent… Manick found that he not only had a good throwing arm but as a cricketer he had talent, he could play. We welcomed him, happy to have an extra man for our games.

And so he went through the initiation of becoming one of the boys, the butt of our jokes, the one to be ordered about, engaging in our quarrels, our many near fights, our running races, cultivating his cricket until he began to bat, not with the easy disdain of Franklyn but with great care, little chance-taking, protecting his wicket, with a careful flourish all his own until the team became confident that he could anchor an end. Yet there were occasions when something dangerous and daring would come over him, and with a gleeful spite, as though trying to break out of every mould in which we had set him (and in which he had established himself), he would start to lash ball from off the wicket with a fury that silenced everybody and made us look at him again, and begin to see him (I thought) as one of us and someone quite his own. And when eventually we picked him for the team, it was as much for his patient plodding as for his moments of crazy hitting.

So Manick was one of us, playing cricket and later joining us under the streetlamp where we practiced karate and ballroom dancing, where we sang love songs and old calypsos, and shared with each other our dreams…” (Lovelace, 2011, pp. 157-158).

Cricket was Manick’s introduction to the world outside his home. He never knew that he had athletic ability until he got on the field with those boys. He had resigned himself to a life of walking the cows. However, he discovered who he was when he hit the ball and the boys cheered for him. He discovered still more depth to himself when his skills improved and he could take risks with the bat at the ball and even open up his wicket. As his confidence improved he tried whatever else the boys were doing – dancing, karate, music. At first it was just to have fun. But eventually, they became his family (Branche & Morgan, 2011; Mitchell, Elias, & Branche, 2015).

Such is the nature of resilience and sports in the Caribbean. Like a Usain Bolt or a Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, the children discover their athletic prowess playing with friends. But somewhere along the way, the skill, the speed, the hunger for competition begins to separate them from the pack. Even after losses, they rally their resolve and come back to the track ready to dominate the next event. The lessons of life which make them risk takers and adventurers are learned on the track and in the training rooms. They travel as a family; and become the brothers and the sisters that they need beyond the shores of home, because they share the same hunger to win and to taste the pleasure of the gold.

**Jamaica’s Journey to the Gold by Olympic Medal Count**

Jamaica’s journey to the “Gold” can be articulated in the biography of the man who has come to define the face of track and field for the last decade, Usain Bolt (Mitchell, 2015). From the moment that he beat his rival on the track at the Waldensia Primary School, and won the promised lunch from his coach and teacher, he vowed that anyone who beat him once would never beat him again (Bolt & Custis, 2010). He had developed the will to live (Mitchell, 2015). In every major sporting event where he is competing, Usain Bolt is the man to beat, and it is no less true for the upcoming Olympics in Rio, Brazil in August 2016. Bolt had a natural tendency to be hyperactive. He ran everywhere. He developed this natural ability by participating in sports. It was in his DNA as his parents had been athletes in their youth, competing in the 200m and 400m races in school. Bolt also hails from Trelawny, a parish with a strong athletic history. Many of the great Jamaican Olympian athletes such as, Merlene Ottey-Page, Veronica Campbell-Brown, and others have familial roots in the parish. Some even joke that there is something in
the yam grown in the hills of the parish that contribute to the nutritional and genetic composition of those who are descendants of the Trelawny soil. So, a sports identity was an early and constant option for affirmation (Branche & Morgan, 2011; Mitchell, Elias, & Branche, 2015). To affirm his community’s belief in his sporting ability, and his community’s affirmation of his chosen identity, the William Knibb High School offered him an athletic scholarship. Competing in Boys’ and Girls’ Championships, as well as other local and regional competitions created the context for Bolt to demonstrate his abilities and support his reach for Olympic gold.

After obtaining 3 gold medals for the 100m, the 200m, and the 4 x 100m relay in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Usain Bolt had become a household name. His lightning bolt trademark, and a repeat performance at the World Championships in Berlin in 2009, and a similar 3 gold medals haul in London in 2012; Usain Bolt was undoubtedly the greatest sprinter that the world had ever seen. He was the new standard for athletics. Suddenly, this young man from a sleepy, rural town in Trelawny, had become the centre of the world’s focus and everyone wanted to know what had caused him to believe that he could not only go to the Olympics and the World Championships, but also to set new world records in his events. It was his desire to never feel ashamed at losing. Erikson’s psychosocial conflict of autonomy versus shame and doubt fueled Bolt’s competitive spirit as he developed industry and competence in sports. His memory of the tears running down his cheeks because he had slipped on the field at Sports Day and lost his race, made him a fierce competitor – against himself. This is the lesson that every athlete must learn, they really are only competing against their best previous self. The aim is always to surpass the previous victory and hope that it will be enough to keep you ahead of your chief rival.

The following table is an excerpt from the archives of the Olympics association of Jamaica’s journey to the gold. Jamaica may attend international events to compete against other nations multiple times her size. However, the truth is that she only competes against the previous performance of the black, green, and gold flag bearers. No other nation of her size has produced what she has produced with the resources that she has been given.

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The preceding table shows that Jamaican, and by extension Caribbean, athletes are resilient and persevere in every area in which they compete at the Olympics. The results show that a nation’s ability does no rest in its geographic size, nor the size of its economy. However, it is determined by the identities that it will affirm, the support that it will give to its ambassadors, in particular sports, and lastly in the will to live. Through the will to live, we will continue to compete against our best former selves, and not against someone else’s best.

REFERENCES


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