

## POKIN AROUND

### 'Surprisingly quick' and other veiled sports stereotypes

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Maybe I'm the only one tuned into this. But it seems that I can't watch a major sporting event without hearing, in veiled terms, racial stereotyping.

There was a guard on Davidson's basketball team named Jason Richards.

The broadcaster referred to him as "surprisingly quick." There was no reason offered as to why it would be so surprising that Richards happens to be quick. It would seem to me that you're either quick or you're not.

Guess what color Richards' skin is?

He's white.

And I have no doubt that Tyler Hansbrough, college basketball's National Player of the Year, works hard at his game, including hour upon hour in the weight room. But the focus has been on his work ethic, his desire, his commitment. Not on his God-given talent.

Guess what color Hansbrough's skin is?

He's white.

I would contend that Hansbrough is not unique. Years ago, I read about Michael Jordan's off-season training regimen. It was brutal in its rigor. I don't think Hansbrough is alone in the college ranks when it comes to work ethic, desire and commitment.

If I hear a player, in just about any sport, described as "heady" or "savvy" or "intelligent," then I can pretty much assume the player is white.

If I hear a player described as "naturally talented" or a "physical specimen," then I can pretty much assume the player is black.

You could have a white wide receiver with 4.3 40-speed (that's fast), and he'll still be a "possession receiver" or a guy with "deceptive speed" or maybe even a "gritty team player."

(Believe it or not, there's a blog that addresses this called Caucasian Wide Receivers of America.)

In my view, you could have a white player snatch a pastrami sandwich from the top of the backboard and eat it before coming back down to earth, and all you'd hear about is his "court awareness."

The problem is that athletes of all colors, like everyone else, run the gamut. There are black athletes who are "intelligent" and slow afoot. There are white athletes with "uncanny talent" who don't watch nearly enough game film.

The racial stereotypes I hear, with what seems to me to be greater frequency, are unfair to all. They don't do justice to the athletic abilities of white athletes and they help foster the racial stereotype of the "dumb black athlete."

It's hard to believe today, but in the 1960s, blacks were considered by some to be too dumb to play quarterback in the NFL.

Many black athletes object to the veiled stereotypes. If white athletes time and time again are referred to as "gritty team players," does that mean black athletes aren't?

Of course, I'm not foolish enough to deny the bell-shaped curves that show a greater percentage of black athletes who are fast or have great leaping ability. There's fast-twitch and slow-twitch muscle fiber. If you're born with an overabundance of slow-twitch muscle fiber, then you're probably going to have better luck in the marathon than 100 meters.

I've watched the sprint finals at high school track meets and college meets, as well as the Olympic finals. Clearly, black athletes are predominate.

Denying that would be like denying that men generally are taller than women, which is true no matter how many tall women you happen to see on a daily basis.

My point is that before another athlete is described as "naturally talented" or "deceptively quick" - a code phrase meaning "white" - think of sprinter Jeremy Wariner.

He's the reigning Olympic champion at 400 meters. He is the third-fastest 400-meter runner ever, having run 43.45 seconds in 2007. That effort was the fifth-fastest 400 meters ever.

Wariner is white.

In the sport of track and field, Wariner is not "deceptively fast" or "surprisingly fast" or a "gritty runner" or an "intelligent runner." He's just fast.

He works hard to be the best. Just as Michael Johnson, who is black and the greatest quarter-miler of all time, did. Just as so many athletes, of all colors, do.

I've been a fan of track and field since high school. There's a simplicity to the sport that strips away adjectives and bias.

You don't have "surprisingly high" high jumpers or "deceptively long" long jumpers.

It comes down to this: How far did you throw? How high did you jump? How fast did you run?

In track and field, there's no official with a whistle who might or might not call a foul in the closing seconds. No umpire with a maddeningly inconsistent strike zone. No French judge trying to settle an old score with the Estonian judge.

There's a tape measure. And there's a stopwatch.

And you're either fast or you're not.