Ariail, Cat M.  *Passing the Baton: Black Women Track Stars and American Identity*

Reviewed by Caela Fenton, University of Oregon

In the summer of 2020 and the wake of the death of Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed Black man shot while out for a run in Glynn County, Georgia, there has been extensive discussion of what activist Alison M. Désir has termed “the unbearable whiteness of running.” In distance running and road racing in particular, attention to the lack of diversity among participants is crucial. In fact, in 2020, when Aliphine Tiliamuk and Sally Kipyego made the podium at the US Olympic Marathon Trials, it marked the first time that the USA will be represented by a Black woman in the Olympic Marathon.

However, the sociocultural history of distance running and its sibling sport of track and field are not identical, particularly with regard to the way that race has refracted through the history of each sport. Rather than lumping all of running in together, Cat M. Ariail charts a meticulous history of Black American women track athletes in *Passing the Baton: Black Women Track Stars and American Identity* (University of Illinois 2020). Honing in on a temporal period of approximately 20 years post-WWII allows for a deep dive and deserved attention to individual athletes—including those who have been traditionally excluded or ignored within athletics history. Ariail’s monograph offers comprehensive coverage that previous articles and chapters, such as Erin Lea Gilreath, Dagny Zupin and Lawrence W. Judge’s “From field days to Olympic Gold: how black women revitalized track and field in the United States” (2017) and Susan Cahn’s “‘Cinderellas’ of Sport: Black Women in Track and Field” (2004), are prohibited from providing due to length.

Among Ariail’s research questions are: who can be an athlete? Who can be an American athlete? Who can be American? These were the questions that Black women’s presence in track and field raised. The relay race metaphor—that Black women track athletes have a rich heritage of agency and power that is “handed” from generation to generation—dovetails with the text’s overarching thesis, that “women’s track and field was [...] consigned to the farthest margins of American sport culture, bound to irrelevancy due to ideologies and realities of race and gender—except that black women track athletes would make themselves relevant” (5).

Each of the five chapters covers a span of 2-3 years; the first, “Raising the Bar: Alice Coachman and the Boundaries of Postwar American Identity,” focuses on Alice Coachman, the first Black woman to win a gold medal at the Olympics (1948 Olympics, high jump). Coachman’s success challenged the “ideal” of the American athlete and correspondingly, American identity. While the mainstream white media ignored her accomplishment, Black sport culture and media celebrated her, but was careful to present Coachman within conventional gender roles. This attention to the intersecting pressures of race and gender that Black women constantly faced (and continue to face) in the sporting sphere is essential to *Passing the Baton’s* overarching analysis.

Chapter two, “Sprints of Citizenship: Identity Politics and Black Women’s Athleticism” focuses on the 1951 Pan Am Games and 1952 Olympics, specifically the rise of sport as a propagandistic tool for communicating American democracy’s superiority in the early Cold War. The third chapter, “Passing the Baton Towards Belonging: Mae Faggs and the Making of the Americanness of Black American Track Women,” argues that the 1955 Pan Am Games and 1956 Olympics are when Black women athletes are fully inserted into the “image of Americanness.” This chapter also puts a spotlight on Mae Faggs, among others. Ariail draws upon sociologist Aimee Meredith Cox’s theory of “entitlement,” which reconceives entitlement as “an empowered statement that disputes the idea that only certain people are worthy of the rights of citizenship and the ability to direct the course of their lives (Cox qt’d in Ariail 99). This compelling argument for understanding Fagg’s athletic performance in terms of this sense of entitlement could have been developed further and/or been a theoretical lens woven more completely into other chapters as well.

“Winning as American Women: The Heteronormativity of Black Women Athletic Heroines,” the fourth chapter, focuses on the US Soviet Dual Meet in 1958, arguing that as Black women garner more attention is sport, there was even more pressure on them to conform to white defined heteronormative gender expectations. Chapter four also delivers this absolute punch: “The symbolism of the likes of [Isabelle] Daniels, [Lucinda] Williams, [Barbara] Jones, [Margaret] Matthews and soon thereafter, Wilma Rudolph, permitted US sport and society to *perform, but not practice, democracy* (116 emphasis mine).

Chapter five, “‘Olympian Quintessence’: Wilma Rudolph, Athletic Femininity, and American Iconicity,” focuses primarily on Wilma Rudolph, building on Ariail’s previous scholarship on the athlete. This chapter demonstrates how Rudolph’s cultural meaning and image was made malleable by the sporting media. Rudolph’s pregnancy was rendered invisible, and her beauty, singularity and ‘overcoming’ of childhood polio were emphasized in order to protect the nation’s prevailing racial and gender order by presenting her as not only an exception, but also ‘proof’ that Black success comes from perseverance and hard work alone.

*Passing the Baton* shines in its clarity, readability and astute incorporation of primary evidence, mostly in the form of incorporated newspaper quotations, which then undergo discursive analysis. The clear chronology prevents the reader from getting lost in the number of names and dates presented—the text succeeds in showing the intricate interconnection of these women (and select men, including the Tuskegee Institute coach, Ed Temple), as they ‘pass the baton.’ Ariail’s book would serve well as assigned or recommended reading for students in courses related to sport history or gender/race/nation and sport.

At the end of the book, I was left wishing that Ariail had taken the relay race metaphor up to the present day, or at least alluded to it in the conclusion. There is a reference to Serena Williams on the final page of the text that feels misplaced given all the accomplished, activist Black women track athletes currently active and enacting their “entitlement” with the baton in their hands. A turn to someone like Allyson Felix, or Alysia Montaño would have carried the conclusion’s momentum further.

After finishing *Passing the Baton*, and as I do when I have running-related topics to discuss, I went for a (masked and distanced) visit with my coach, Tom Heinonen, outside of the University of Oregon’s Hayward Field. I excitedly ran through what I had learned about Coachman, Faggs, McDaniels, Tyus, Rudolph, as well as the Tuskegee Tigerettes and the “Temple Way.” Tom patiently waited until I was finished and then, as he always does, completely one-upped my retelling with his own personal anecdote about how Margaret Bailes (formerly Margaret Johnson) was discovered by Wendy Jerome after happening-upon an all-comer’s meet at Hayward Field as a young girl. Trained by Jerome, Bailes went on to win a gold medal in the 4x100m at the 1968 Olympics at only 17 years old. Years later, Tom’s wife Janet Heinonen put forth a petition to have a new track facility named after Bailes, to rectify the fact that she had been oft-overlooked in Eugene’s running history.

Naturally, I opened up the book and began scouring for mention of Johnson/Bailes. Her career fell just outside of the text’s temporal parameters. Here’s hoping that Ariail or others advance their own relay and continue documenting the passing of the baton from generation to generation of Black women track athletes, so that we can read all the way up to the present.