

Why black British tennis players are missing from Wimbledon

23 June 2005 Deborah Gabriel

A complex set of circumstances disadvantage black people in sport

Black British sports men and women excel in athletics, football, rugby and even the most British of sports, cricket. However, when it comes to tennis, black players are noticeable by their absence, for whilst there is collective pride in the success of Venus and Serena Williams, no-one is asking where the British equivalents are.

However, a recent study commissioned by the BME Sports Network East holds many clues as to why there is so little involvement in tennis from Britain's black communities. *Increasing BME Participation in Sport and Physical Activity*, published in January by Ploszajski Lynch Consulting Ltd looks at a whole range of sports but there are some interesting revelations concerning tennis.

The author states that there is no single reason for the **“current imbalance in participation between the population as a whole and BME communities... but that a complex set of circumstances work together to disadvantage people from ethnic minorities.”**

Poverty is cited as a major factor with 57% of people from ethnic minorities socially excluded from sports on the grounds of poverty. The report argues that a **“white sporting establishment”** exists to the exclusion of BME individuals who have little involvement in **“the organisation and governance of sport”** at both national and county level.

In short, the lack of black people in decision-making roles within sports organisations means there is little opportunity for them to ascend to senior and more influential roles that could promote their wider involvement in sport. Another factor contributing to the lack of a black national tennis champion can be explained by what the report calls the **“sports development ghetto.”**

This is where excellent work is done developing black participation in sport at a local level by sports development teams, but instead of this being transferred into the mainstream black individuals remain within the programmes **“specifically developed for them.”**

The report also states that there is a **“need for young people to have role models from their community.”** Whilst there are many black faces visible in football in other sports such as tennis there are very few.

Black people are more interested in tennis than whites

A common assumption made is that black people are more interested in football and athletics and do not show any interest in 'finer' sports such as tennis.

However, the authors carried out research to gauge the level of interest in a variety of sports among ethnic minorities.

Questioned as to what sports people would like to participate in but do not at present, 7.5% of people from ethnic minorities indicated an interest in tennis, compared with just 3.7% of white respondents.

With such a high level of unmet demand from BME communities for tennis, says the report, this is enough evidence to support further development of tennis programmes.

There is **“considerable potential for growth amongst many BME groups in tennis”** the report states with 15% of Black African men and 11% of Black African women saying they would like to play.

Unfortunately black youngsters are often directed towards socially acceptable sports such as football and basketball.

Jean Rodrigues, whose son Jason used to belong to a tennis club in Newham told Black Britain:

“Tennis is still seen as an elitist sport and many inner London boroughs do not run any schemes because they think black kids aren’t interested.”

Whenever anyone meets my son, who is a young black boy of 6ft 2, the first thing they say to him is, you must be good at basketball. There is this perception that black boys are only good at certain sports. ”

How can black involvement in tennis be increased?

The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) is the governing body of British tennis and has recognised the need to broaden participation in tennis by under-represented groups. City Tennis Development Officer Funke Awoderu spoke to Black Britain about a number of schemes they currently operate .

The Play Tennis Campaign says LTA’s promotional literature is a **“grass roots promotion to encourage people of all ages, backgrounds and ethnic origin to the play the game and join clubs and programmes.”**

The scheme, which runs between April and September allows individuals to have a ‘taster’ of tennis for free. The campaign, said Ms Awoderu: **“is really a marketing tool for the tennis clubs and to enable people to experience tennis and if they are interested join a club in their locality.”**

However, there are other activities on offer apart from a day’s free tennis for people to get involved in. **“This is all about trying to make tennis a lot more accessible and to break down the perception that tennis is only a summer sport.”**

Another scheme which is fairly successful is the City Tennis Club programme which aims to make tennis more affordable and accessible to people from areas where there is a lack of facilities for playing tennis.

“The idea is to demonstrate to people in these areas that they are part of a bigger picture and that there is a bigger network of clubs out there”, said Ms Awoderu.

There are presently 30 city tennis clubs including Langdon School in Newham which has eight floodlit courts and caters for pupils from a number of different ethnic backgrounds. Its tennis development officer Patrick Hector, a black male is **“a fantastic role model who all the kids relate to”**, Ms Awoderu told Black Britain.

“By making sure that through the coaching route there are positive role models out there is how we try to effect change and improve participation.

This is one of the most effective ways we can influence black participation in tennis”, said Ms Awoderu. The report states there is no evidence of any organisations in Britain supporting the development of BME coaches, PE teachers or leisure managers.

However, pointing to the numerous initiatives in the USA, the report recommends work experience schemes within sports venues and promotion of Community Sports Leaders Award in BME

communities. Furthermore, there should be greater mentoring and support for people from ethnic minorities who wish to work in these fields.

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