



## Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete

By William C. Rhoden

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From Jackie Robinson to Muhammad Ali and Arthur Ashe, African American athletes have been at the center of modern culture, their on-the-field heroics admired and stratospheric earnings envied. But for all their money, fame, and achievement, says *New York Times* columnist William C. Rhoden, black athletes still find themselves on the periphery of true power in the multibillion-dollar industry their talent built.

Provocative and controversial, Rhoden's *\$40 Million Slaves* weaves a compelling narrative of black athletes in the United States, from the plantation to their beginnings in nineteenth-century boxing rings to the history-making accomplishments of notable figures such as Jesse Owens, Althea Gibson, and Willie Mays. Rhoden reveals that black athletes' "evolution" has merely been a journey from literal plantations—where sports were introduced as diversions to quell revolutionary stirrings—to today's figurative ones, in the form of collegiate and professional sports programs. He details the "conveyor belt" that brings kids from inner cities and small towns to big-time programs, where they're cut off from their roots and exploited by team owners, sports agents, and the media. He also sets his sights on athletes like Michael Jordan, who he says have abdicated their responsibility to the community with an apathy that borders on treason.

The power black athletes have today is as limited as when masters forced their slaves to race and fight. The primary difference is, today's shackles are often the athletes' own making.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

*New York Times* columnist Rhoden offers a charged assessment of the state of black athletes in America, using the pervasive metaphor of the plantation to describe a modern sports industry defined by white ownership and black labor. The title and the notion behind it are sure to raise eyebrows, and Rhoden admits that his original title of *Lost Tribe Wandering*, for all its symbolic elegance, lacked punch. And Rhoden isn't pulling any of his. Rather than seeing rags-to-riches stories where underprivileged athletes reach the Promised Land by way of their skills, he casts the system as one in which those athletes are isolated from their backgrounds, used to maximize profit and instilled with a mindset "whereby money does not necessarily alter one's status as 'slave,' as long as the 'owner' is the one who controls the rules that allow that money to be made." Rhoden's writing is intelligent and cogent, and his book's tone is hardly as inflammatory as its name. It's possible that his title and working metaphor will turn off readers who will simply refuse to consider young men making millions of dollars playing a game to be disenfranchised. Nevertheless, this is an insightful look at the role of blacks in sports they dominate but hardly control. (June)

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—Rhoden's provocative thesis is that today's black athletes are akin to pre-Civil War plantation slaves, because slavery had as much to do with power and control as it had to do with wealth. The big-money sports in America—football, baseball, basketball—are owned and controlled almost exclusively by white men, and yet each has a disproportionately large percentage of black athletes. They are well paid, but they have no direct power over the current and future direction of these sports. More than that, they lack any real control over their roles within these sports. The author supports his position with a well-researched and thoughtfully rendered survey of the history of the black athlete. From plantation-born jockeys and boxers of the early 19th century, to the NBA of Michael Jordan and Larry Johnson, Rhoden remains focused on prevailing structures of racism. He notes the accomplishments and frustrations of several well-known figures, including Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Jesse Owens, and Willie Mays, as well as others who have faded from our collective memory. In doing so, he examines the damaging effects of what he calls the conveyor belt in the contemporary sports world, where children as young as 11 and 12 are pegged as prospects and viewed as potential sources of income through middle school, high school, and college. This book will no doubt spark controversy, but will also prove to be a lasting contribution to the history of race relations in America.—Robert Saunderson, *Berkeley Public Library, CA*

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From [Booklist](#)

*New York Times* sports columnist Rhoden tackles the challenging issue of the status of the black athlete in contemporary America. His comparison of star athletes, with their celebrity and high salaries, to slaves is certain to provoke controversy, but Rhoden provides strong historic context. He traces the history of athleticism and race from slaves securing privilege, or even freedom, through athletic prowess through the early stages of racial integration of athletics at major colleges through the huge compensation paid to athletes today. He describes the isolation, if not alienation, of black athletes from the broader black community, heightening the distance between those who continue to be oppressed by racism and those whose material well-being may have desensitized them to the plight of the less-privileged. Rhoden is critical of Michael Jordan and Bob Johnson, the first black owner of a major sports franchise, for failing to somehow contribute to the uplift of the broader black community. This work sheds light on contemporary sports and race issues.

Vernon Ford

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