

Chapter 1 Excerpt

Not Just Statistically Dominant but Stylistically Different

As he powered his way to the bar set almost two feet above his head, before gathering himself for that final mighty effort that would send him twisting backwards, headfirst, into the pit below, Javier Sotomayor knew that a special place in history had been reserved for him. He was always confident. Without confidence, what he did for a living would be impossible; the bar would seem too high, far too intimidating. But tonight it was more than that. Tonight he knew, as only those whose fortunes depend on understanding what their bodies tell them, could. Tonight he knew not even a bar set so high could defeat him. He was ready, in both mind and body, for this test.

When the competition began, the powerful young Cuban was already the greatest high jumper of all time and held the world record. But on that muggy Saturday night in August of 1989, he became a legend. What he did on the final day of the Caribbean Zone Track and Field Championship in San Juan, Puerto Rico, was thought—even after man walked on the moon—to have been beyond human accomplishment. To the thousands who were actually in the Sexto Escobar Stadium that night, it was the greatest physical feat they had ever witnessed.

More than a decade has passed since that fateful night, and during all of that time the eight-foot mark has been reached on only one other occasion—and that was some four years later by Sotomayor himself. No other jumper has ever cleared eight feet, or indeed even come close. Although a giant leap (the greatest high jump of all time), clearing eight feet was for Sotomayor only a slight improvement on his existing world record, which stood at just a half-inch less than the magical barrier of eight feet. But adding that final half-inch and breaking through that physical and psychological barrier was, in its way, as important a symbol of man's seemingly limitless potential as was the shattering of earlier barriers, both physical and technological, that also limited man's reach.

Sotomayor's great leap was also symbolic of the extraordinary athletic ability of the descendants of the black Africans who were snatched from the rain forests of West Africa and dragged in chains and shackles to the sugar and cotton plantations of the New World. Sotomayor comes from the same racial stock as Charles Dumas, the black American, who thirty-three years earlier had broken the seven-foot barrier. And, of course, both Sotomayor and Dumas share a common genetic background with the great black athletes of North America, the Caribbean, Latin America, West Africa, and Europe. Barry Bonds and Tiger Woods of the United States, Sammy Sosa and Pedro Martinez of the Dominican Republic, Hakeem Olajuwon of Nigeria, Patrick Ewing and Lennox Lewis of Jamaica, and almost all of the other great black athletes in the world—with the notable exception of the unmatchable distance runners from other areas of Africa—are all united by a common bond to West Africa.

While these great distance runners from other regions of Africa, as explained earlier, share some athletically advantageous characteristics with West Africans—longer arms and legs, narrower hips, and lower subcutaneous fat—they appear, based on the result of a number of studies, to be similar to whites and all other groups, except those of West African descent, in muscle fiber distribution, that is in the ratio of fast-twitch to slow-twitch muscle fibers. Although it is possible, perhaps even likely—because most live and train in mountainous regions—that they have unusually high levels of hemoglobin and therefore exceptionally effective oxygen-transporting systems, their athletic advantage appears to be primarily biomechanical: longer legs and narrower hips increase stride length and efficiency, and lower body fat improves power-to-weight ratios. These advantages could be particularly meaningful in distance running, which is where the great African runners from places like Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Morocco excel.

It is especially instructive that the most successful African distance runners are from high altitude regions of Ethiopia and Kenya. The great Olympic champion, Haile Gebrselassie was raised in the highland region of Arssi in Ethiopia, and a significant majority of Kenya's greatest runners come from a relatively small area in that country's Nandi Hills. In addition to a running tradition, the countries share a common border and closely related peoples. Centuries of selection, in the relatively thin air and rugged terrain of the highland regions of these countries, have produced peoples remarkably adapted for distance running; low bodyweights, because of both size and extremely low subcutaneous fat percentages, long arms and legs, high levels of hemoglobin, and powerful hearts and lungs.

But no other racial or ethnic group has ever produced individuals with the combination of anatomical and physiological characteristics required to match the feats of the great black athletes of West African descent. Nor, given the very special environmental conditions that created the unique abilities of West Africans, is it likely to ever happen again. Not even the intensive efforts of the state-supported systems of the former East Germany and the former Soviet Union were able to produce male athletes capable of competing successfully against the best black male athletes from around the world. Those systems, because they combined early detection and selection of potential champion athletes with financial support and intensive and often scientifically innovative training methods, were able to turn out white athletes who were usually able to defeat other white athletes from less comprehensive systems. But training, however intensive and scientific, proved repeatedly to be an inadequate substitution for the genetic endowment of the great black male athletes.

For many years a striking feature of international track and field competitions, including the Olympics, was the considerable disparity between the performances of male and female athletes from the Soviet Union, East Germany, and other Eastern European countries. Soviet and European men had very little success in the explosive events—such as the 100-, 200-, and 400-meter sprints, 110-meter hurdles, and long jump—when competing against black athletes from the U.S., West Africa, and the Caribbean. But before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the women were often successful not only against black track and field athletes but against all comers in just about all Olympic events, including swimming and gymnastics.