



Perceptions of Arthur

What the papers said

Pioneers like Arthur allow perceptions to change and there is evidence of both prejudice and tolerance in the way people saw Arthur.

Generally, the more negative and racist descriptions of him were given by national or regional newspapers who had the more politicised agenda of upholding Victorian ideas about race that justified the British ruling classes' thief of Africa.

Locally, and by people who knew him personally, Arthur was acclaimed as a talented celebrity and man of character who bought a certain amount of recognition to the community. At a cricket club dinner in 1886, a toast to him was proposed, and a song, 'Wharton, of Darlington', composed by his trainer, Emmanuel Harbron, was sung and 'nearly raised the rafters'. (Darlington & Stockton Times, 25/12/1886). Arthur is also known to have sung at post-match concerts.

The Ashton Herald, 15/2/1896 described him as:

"... a modest and unassuming man, a genial companion, and a friend whom any person might feel proud to number amongst his acquaintances".

This is a far cry from the image of Arthur as a cocky, showman as some reporters made out. The most famous being:

"Is the darkie's pate too thick for it to dawn upon him that between the posts is no place for a skylark? By some it's called coolness - bosh!" (Football News and Athletic Journal, 29 October 1887).

An interview in the Athletic Journal, 'Men I have met', 26 June, 1888, also echoes a different reflection of Arthur on a personal level:

"Arthur is a most sociable fellow when you know him, but you have to get to know him first..."

The Athletic Journal reporter appears to be saying that when you judge Arthur as a man and individual, and not through the invented lens of the 'savage African', he is a man of standing and integrity. In the same article the reporter says:



Arthur Wharton: 1865 to 1930

The World's First Black Professional Footballer

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“Arthur has a bit of temper when he’s crossed, but taken all round, he is a straightforward, good-natured chap”.

The temper of which the reporter refers can also be interpreted as Arthur resisting unfair treatment both in sport and in relation to his ethnicity. He was known to be a proud man; unafraid to defend himself, and he was regularly documented to have publically shown his disagreement of injustice.

For example, in the same interview two incidents of Arthur’s ‘temper’ are described. The first is a story Arthur told of a time he was resting between races, unseen, and overheard two rivals say, *“Who’s he that we should be frightened of him beating us? We can beat a blooming nigger any time”*. He recalled jumping up and startling them with, *“Allow me to help you understand that I not only run, I do a little boxing when it is required”*, and that the rivals made a quick getaway!

The second confrontation talks of Arthur being challenged by another runner, Harry Gent, through a newspaper threat goading him into a running challenge when they were both making a name for themselves:

“As Wharton at the time had not the slightest intention of joining the pro ranks, he considered the issuing of a challenge insulting and wrote to the challengers that he was not afraid to meet them”.

In an interview with Arthur (Athletic journal, 21/6/1887), he talks of several other incidents of unfairness: *“At Middlesbrough, I was done out of the first prize in the 120 yards, which I won fairly by 3 yards, but the judges made a mistake and when I was presented with the salad bowl as second place, I smashed the prize in front on the committee and told them to make another of the bits”*.

He later talks of having *“some curious adventures of men trying to ‘square’ me...”* . He goes on to give an example: *“I recollect a man once offering me £20 to lose a race. I asked him if he knew who he was speaking to, and he said, of course he did, but I told him I would run and if he ever made an offer like that again, I would report him to the Athletics Association”*.

£20 was a huge amount of money in those days and no doubt much needed by Arthur to supplement his poor wage. What these stories and newspaper descriptions tell us, is that, Arthur, being in the public eye, was a threat to the prevailing notions of race. He was strong-willed, bold, intelligent, fair and fearless in his manner. How dare he, as a black man, have so much audacity and act without inferiority?! Quite simply, Arthur’s character, education and ability infuriated white supremacists as they told a very different story to the racial propaganda of the time.