

**BASKETBALL AND BIG QUESTIONS**  
***The Caitlin Clark Controversy—***  
**Greats, “Greatest of All Time,”**  
**White Stars in a “Black Sport,”**  
**Racism and the Fight Against It,**  
**and the Kind of World We Should Strive to Have**

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**by Bob Avakian—**  
**revolutionary leader,**  
**author and architect of the new communism,**  
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With that in mind, what is crucially important is the fact that (as I have spoken to in previous articles and social media messages) *this is a rare time when the revolution that could make all this possible is not only urgently necessary but could actually be brought about.*

And, just as all of us who want to see a better world, without all these outrages, need to be actively, urgently working for this revolution, at the same time we (and people generally) should not fail to appreciate the beauty that comes through in many different areas of life, in both nature and human society, whatever and whoever is the source of that beauty.

which is systematically, and often violently, asserted and enforced. (Since 1960, the number of Black people killed by police *is greater than the thousands* who were lynched during the whole time of open segregation and Ku Klux Klan terror after the Civil War. Even “conservative” Black people cannot actually escape this racism—and the fact that they, too, might become victims of police brutality and murder—while they are busy insisting that this is not a racist country, or that racist oppression is not that big a deal!)

The answer to the very real outrage of racist oppression should not be to see it as some kind of injustice when someone white excels in an arena in which Black people have, finally, been able to set the standard. Here, I am reminded of the situation, several decades ago, when the prominent Black NBA player Isiah Thomas expressed agreement with the comment that, if Larry Bird were Black, he would be regarded as just another good player, instead of being built up as a great player. The truth is that Bird *was* a great player—and as one Black sports commentator observed: Thomas *picked the wrong white boy* to make the point that, in an overall way, white people are unjustly elevated above Black people. (It is true that Bird was seen by some as a “great white hope”—something which should have no place in basketball, or anywhere else—but that is a different question than how good Bird actually was.)

The answer to discrimination and oppression overall is not to respond with narrowed vision and small-minded, petty revenge, especially against those who are *not the cause* of that oppression. The answer is to fight against discrimination and oppression, wherever it exists, and to do so with the largeness of mind that seeks to put an end to the murderous oppression and merciless exploitation to which *masses* of people—literally billions of people, throughout the world—are subjected. The answer to all this is to get rid of—sweep away—this whole system that has this oppression *built into* it, and replace this with a system where white supremacy, male supremacy, and so many other outrages of this system of capitalism-imperialism, will be abolished and uprooted and will continue to exist only in museums of ancient history.

# BASKETBALL AND BIG QUESTIONS

## ***The Caitlin Clark Controversy— Greats, “Greatest of All Time,” White Stars in a “Black Sport,” Racism and the Fight Against It, and the Kind of World We Should Strive to Have***

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### **Part 1: Caitlin Clark—A Special, Outstanding Basketball Player**

The men’s and women’s college (NCAA) basketball championships have just concluded.

The men’s championship was won, for the second straight year, by the University of Connecticut (UCONN).

Of greater interest—mainly for positive reasons, but unfortunately also for negative ones—is the women’s championship, which was won by South Carolina, finishing up an undefeated season with a win over Iowa and its superstar player, Caitlin Clark, in the championship game.

In a social media message, Number Twenty-Five, @BobAvakianOfficial, I discuss some of the negative, as well as positive, dimensions of this championship, particularly as this relates to the South

Carolina coach, Dawn Staley. Here, I am focusing on the basketball achievements of Caitlin Clark, and the controversy around this.

This is going to be in two parts. In Part 1, I am going to speak to why Caitlin Clark is deserving of the recognition and promotion she gets as an outstanding basketball player.

While, overall, there is recognition that Clark is a truly outstanding basketball player, there is also some “hating”—“backlash” and “backbiting”—against Clark, which involves petty, ridiculous, and even blatantly false arguments. But there are also larger questions bound up with this, including the fact that Clark, who is white, is a superstar in a sport that is identified with and dominated by Black people, in terms of who plays and excels in the game (even while most of the coaches—and nearly all of the administrators of the game at the college level, and the owners and top executives of the professional leagues and the television networks that profit from the games—are white). In Part 2, I will speak more directly and deeply to this.

Before getting into what makes Clark truly outstanding as a basketball player, let me get this out of the way: I am not going to be talking about what the politics of different *individuals* may be, including Clark. It is safe to say that neither she, nor any of the others I will be talking about here, agree with me about the need for revolution to sweep away this system of capitalism-imperialism, and bring into being a radically different and much better system. What I am focusing on here is *aesthetics*: the appreciation of beauty and artistry—which, in many different areas of life, including sports, enrich human existence, and which should be part of any society that people would want to live in. But aesthetics cannot be entirely separated from politics: how people appreciate beauty, or don’t—even what they think is beautiful, and not—is influenced by the larger society and world in which people live, how this affects people, and how they respond to that.

So, let’s get into it.

With regard to Caitlin Clark, it is a fact that she pays respect to the great women’s players who have come before her, and she very passionately talks about how her hero and model when she was coming up was Maya Moore, a great Black basketball player who was a college and professional star. And Clark, who makes a point of saying that she wants her success to be an inspiration to young boys as well as girls, clearly has in mind *all* kids, and definitely not just white ones!

Still, there is the fact that, through no fault of her own, Clark’s success and fame seems to be, for some, a reminder that Black people are still held back and held down in so many ways. As I have emphasized before, even “middle class” Black people cannot escape the racism, discrimination, brutality and murder by police that is directed against Black people as a whole in this country—in fact, no Black person, no matter how “highly placed,” can fully escape this. And, after all, basketball is an arena where, for a long time, Black people were excluded from playing in the dominant leagues, even as many excelled at the game; it was only a few decades ago that they finally succeeded in essentially breaking through that barrier, and have come to set the terms of how the game is played.

But here is a striking irony: Resentment against Clark for excelling, in a sport where Black people have come to set the terms, *fails to give full recognition and appreciation to the style of play and standards that have been established by Black people, which Clark has drawn from and built upon in developing her game!*

Some might argue: Well, given that Black people have established this position in basketball, they should not feel threatened if now and then a white player comes along who is at the top of the game. And, as I have noted, for the most part among Black players, and former players, etc., there has been real appreciation for Clark’s game and accomplishments. But the fact remains that, no matter what their position, Black people can never feel “safe and secure” in this country where, at every level, white supremacy is built into the structures and functioning of the system—a white supremacy

other factors like “promoting players in order to market the game.” Of course, some people might disagree with this assessment of mine. But, in any case, the point is that this question—of how good different people are—should be approached and determined according to an *objective* evaluation of the level they have actually attained, and not some other standard. And if Watkins, or Hidalgo—or both of them (or someone else)—were to rise to the level that Clark has achieved, that would not be because of statistics (points scored, and so on) but, as with Clark herself, the all-around quality of what they do and its overall impact on the game.

I believe I have clearly made the case that Clark definitely deserves the acclaim she has gotten as a truly outstanding basketball player. Now, to the degree that some people’s desire to build up Clark is because she is white—rather than simply *because* of how outstanding she actually is—then that is clearly wrong, it is an expression of the dominant racism in this country, and it should be very strongly opposed. But that does not justify an attitude of resentment against Clark, or a desire to deny or diminish her accomplishments, because she is white in an arena where Black people have generally set the standard.

On one level, although this resentment against Clark is not justified, it is understandable: The fact is that, right down to today, even with the accomplishments and attainment of prominence by more than a few Black people, inequality remains a major factor in American society, and it is the case that, because of this discrimination, it is still difficult for Black people to carve out places in this country where they can achieve success, as measured by the standards of this society. Basketball is one of a few such places—and now, here comes this white woman, Caitlin Clark, being so prominent in basketball. This reminds me of a routine by Richard Pryor, where he only half-jokingly said that he *wished* Jerry West weren’t so good at basketball! (West, a white hall of fame player, originally from West Virginia, became a prominent star in college and then the professional NBA in the late 1950s into the 1970s.)

I’ll start with this, as background: When it comes to sports, my greatest love is basketball, which I played for many decades, since I was very young. Although, in my senior year in high school (at Berkeley High), I was the quarterback of the football team, and I spent a lot of time on playground basketball courts, all year round, I did not play on the high school basketball team because I couldn’t get along with the coach, who was a Christian *fundamentalist* and a *racist*. I did play in recreational leagues and church leagues (yes I, a revolutionary communist *atheist*, was raised in a religious family—though not a *fundamentalist* religious family—and I attended church in my youth, up through high school).

One of my fondest memories of basketball in high school was a summer league game I played in, against a team led by Paul Silas, who later became a Hall of Fame college basketball player and spent many years in the professional NBA. The team I was on *lost* that summer league game, badly, but I managed to score 16 points—something which still gives me a warm feeling. I was a huge fan of the great basketball teams of McClymonds High School, in West Oakland, whose star then was Paul Silas. (I enthusiastically rooted for the McClymonds teams—except when they played against my high school!) So, this made my accomplishment in that summer league game all the more special to me.

Besides playing a lot of basketball, from the time I was five years old I have watched a tremendous number of games. And, if you are willing and eager to learn, as I have been, you can learn a great deal, not only if you play the game yourself but even just from watching and listening to players, coaches, commentators, and others with knowledge of the game (you can learn even when you disagree with their analysis, as I often do).

Which brings me back to Caitlin Clark. Having finished her fourth and final year playing for the University of Iowa, Clark is about to enter the women’s professional league (the WNBA). During her time as a college player, she set a number of incredible records. To cite

just one dimension of this, Clark is now the all-time leading scorer in both women's and men's NCAA college basketball.

There has been a lot of discussion, and some heated debate, about whether Clark should be considered the "GOAT" (Greatest of All Time) in women's basketball. Some—including some who should know better—have argued that Clark cannot be considered the greatest of all time, because her Iowa team did not win a championship (or, multiple championships). This is a ridiculous standard for greatness, since basketball is a *team* sport, and whether a team can win a championship depends on the team as a whole, and not on any one player, no matter how great that one player might be. The fact is that, in her final two years, Clark led her Iowa team to the women's championship game. Even though they lost both times, it was a remarkable accomplishment for Iowa to reach those championship games, something that was overwhelmingly due to Clark.

I also have to say that I think this whole "GOAT" discussion is the wrong way to look at things. After all, *time* (as in Greatest of *All Time*) continues to move on; as time moves on, conditions change, and in every field of human endeavor, people continue to come forward and build on what has come before. Just as it is often said that records (such as records for most points in basketball) "are meant to be broken," so, too, the overall performance of even the greatest player in a particular era is very likely to be surpassed by someone who comes along later.

The most meaningful and important question is how to evaluate someone in relation to their time and circumstances, and do they introduce new elements, or a new combination of elements, into the game—or, in any case, do they in some way set a new, higher standard that others can strive to equal or surpass?

The answer, with regard to Clark, is definitely *yes*. And, although I think Greatest of *All Time* is not a valid standard, I *do* think it is possible to say that someone is the greatest in their time—and the

The answer to that question is that actual achievement has to be evaluated on the objective basis of what people actually have accomplished, without regard to their "identity." If someone has a really serious illness, should they be treated by the very best doctor they can find—whatever that doctor's "identity"—or should this decision be *based* on the "identity" of the doctor? (Yes, the fact that a doctor might be of the same "identity" as a patient—and have shared many of the same significant experiences—is relevant, as part of the picture; but, even taking that into account, in fundamental terms the decision about treatment by a doctor should be based on the overall knowledge and skill of the doctor, whatever their "identity.")

With regard to JuJu Watkins and Hannah Hidalgo, having seen each of them play, I can say this: Watkins in particular shows the ability to be a big-time scorer as well as very good all-around player. Hidalgo is definitely good but, at this point at least, she is not on the same level as Watkins. (There are also other very good young women basketball players who have shown the potential to be great—for example, MiLaysia Fulwiley, on the South Carolina team, who, along with Watkins and Hidalgo, was a first-year college player this season.) But, again, at this point at least, none is on the same level—or in the same category—as Clark and the way she has elevated the women's game.

(Especially for people familiar with basketball, this should help illustrate this assessment of mine. When I try to think of someone to compare Watkins to—man or woman, college or pro—Kevin Durant comes to mind: an NBA all-star, a relentless offensive player, who is very difficult to keep from scoring, and who contributes in a number of other ways. As for whom to compare Clark to... I can't think of anybody, because the "total package" of her game is new and unique—it is, literally, incomparable.)

This is my definite assessment, which is based on an appreciation of accomplishment in basketball, especially when it is played at its best and most creative—and is not based on "identity politics" or

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Yet, some people seem to believe that there is an injustice in the fact that Clark, who is white, is being talked about as possibly the greatest in an arena (women's basketball) which is identified with Black people and in which there are many very good Black players. And it should be noted that, while some of this backlash is being voiced by certain Black people, more than a little of it is coming from white people who are apparently trying, in wrong ways, to establish their anti-racism—or are simply posturing as “woke” opponents of racism—adopting narrow and petty positions, which don't do any service to Black people and the actual fight against racism.

This was expressed rather crudely in an article in *USA Today*, whose headline proclaims: “Women's basketball needs faces of future to be Black. Enter JuJu Watkins and Hannah Hidalgo.” (Hidalgo was the key player on the Notre Dame team, which was defeated early in the NCAA championship tournament; Watkins was the star of the USC team which lost later, in the “Elite Eight” round, just before the “Final Four.”) Along with other significant problems with this *USA Today* article, it mixes up different questions.

First, is it important for Black women to get credit and be respected for their achievements that are truly admirable in basketball (and more generally)? Should any prejudice or discrimination in this regard be strongly opposed and overcome? And is recognition of this important, particularly for young Black girls and Black kids generally? The answer to these questions is definitely yes. Speaking specifically of women's basketball, Black players are not the only ones who have paved the way, setting the foundation for those who are now getting a lot of acclaim, including Clark, but they have had a very significant role in laying that foundation.

The other important question is this: With what standard should achievement be evaluated and appreciated—according to what people have actually done, or according to their “identity”?

greatest *up to their time*. A very strong case can be made to say that about Clark.

Some of this can be measured in a “quantitative” way—in terms of statistics. For example, Clark was not only the top scorer in NCAA women's basketball this year (averaging nearly 32 points a game); she was also the leader in assists (passing the ball in a way that directly sets up a teammate to score), with 9 assists a game, while also averaging about 7 rebounds a game (getting the ball after a shot is missed by the other team, or your own team). In NCAA women's basketball, Clark was the leader in *both* scoring and assists this season, as well as the previous season. In her four years at Iowa, she scored nearly 4,000 points, and she is the only college player, man or woman, who has scored more than 3,000 points while also having more than 1,000 assists (and the only one with more than 3,000 points, 1,000 assists, and 850 rebounds). And, as is often unnoticed (or even denied), she is also a very good defensive player, including in the dimension of stealing the ball (taking it away from opponents).



Caitlin Clark (22) Photo: AP

All these are definitely impressive particular facts. But, as truly impressive as they are, they don't tell the full story. Clark's greatness is much more a matter of "quality"—the overall way she plays the game. With Clark, there is that phenomenon where "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts": her impact on the game overall is more than what would be seen just from adding up individual parts of her game, as outstanding as they are.

The way that Clark stands out is not just that she is a prolific scorer who can make shots from almost anywhere past mid-court—including shots at great distance, not only from just outside the three-point line (a little more than 20 feet from the basket) but from 30 or even 35 feet—which causes announcers of games, commentators, etc., to repeatedly exclaim things like, "This is unbelievable, the consistency with which she does this has never been seen in the women's game before!"—and so on. (For those having a hard time picturing this, I strongly urge you to check out Clark's basketball highlights on the internet.) This extraordinary ability of hers makes it much more difficult to guard her, since she is also very skilled at "putting the ball on the floor" (dribbling the ball toward the basket) and scoring in that way, or setting up teammates to score.

It is not just the fact that Clark repeatedly makes "clutch shots," when the game, or the momentum of the game, is on the line.

It is not only that she is incredibly skilled at passing the ball to teammates, making great pass after great pass, from all over the court, including extremely accurate long passes with a lot of "zip" on them.

She has a remarkable "court sense" and "court vision"—with the ability to see where not only her teammates but also the opposing players are, at any given time, including when play is moving fast—which, among other things, is a key to her great passing. She "sees the game" and "commands the court" in a way that is truly exceptional.

player to play defense, precisely when the game was "on the line." To have *not* called that foul would actually have given an unfair advantage to *UCONN*.

As can be seen in an objective evaluation of this situation, and in many other ways, the relevant question that comes through in all this is: What are the *real reasons* for the "hating" and "backlash" against Clark? Why can't some people—especially people who claim to be, and in many cases actually are, basketball fans—just fully take in and enjoy the beauty of what Clark does on the basketball court?

Part of the answer, no doubt, is the whole "tear down" thing. (Why so many people love to tear down others, including those who are successful in one field or another—that is something I'm not going to get into here, beyond noting that this is a big part of the whole poisonous culture in this country.)

There is also the rather glaring fact that some—though far from all—women's basketball players and former players, who have gotten acclaim for their accomplishments, have allowed themselves to sink into petty and rather ugly jealousy over the fact that Clark is simply a better player than they are (or were). This was clearly evident in the remarks of some "commentators" during the course of the women's NCAA tournament and in particular the "Final Four" semifinals and the final game.

At the same time, there is the phenomenon that should not be ignored and needs to be spoken to directly: the fact that Clark is white in a sport that is identified with and dominated by Black people (in terms of who plays and excels at the game). In this regard, it needs to be noted, first of all, that for the most part, Black players and former players, coaches, commentators, etc., have expressed real appreciation for Clark's game and the way it has called attention to women's basketball in a far greater way than previously, while at the same time Clark has played a decisive role in elevating the level of the women's game overall. This includes Dawn Staley, the celebrated coach of the South Carolina team, which beat Iowa in the championship game. (Once more, in a social media message,



that of her team) when it should not have, there have also been many situations where the opposite is true—and, as a general phenomenon, the “defense” that opposing teams play against Clark pretty regularly involves fouls that are often not called: bumping and grabbing her, in the attempt to keep her from getting herself in a good position to score, or to set up teammates to score.

One sharp example of how some people try to find ways to diminish Clark’s achievements was seen in the semifinal game of the NCAA championship tournament between Iowa and the University of Connecticut (UCONN). With only a few seconds remaining in that game, UCONN had the ball while trailing Iowa by a single point, and a UCONN player was called for an offensive foul, giving the ball to Iowa, and essentially sealing a win for Iowa. Right away, the internet and television commentary was full of ill-founded complaints about how this call was wrong, or should not have been made—with the implication (or outright statement) that the game was “rigged” in favor of Clark and Iowa.

The truth is that this was an *obvious* foul by the UCONN player—something that anybody looking with an informed and objective eye could have clearly seen in the replay that was shown on TV at the time (and was available via the internet). As for the idea that calls like this should not be made when a game is being decided in the final seconds—frequently expressed with statements like “the players, and not the referees, should determine the outcome of the game”—the fact is that the players are supposed to determine the outcome of the game *within the framework of definite rules*. If the rules should somehow not be applied in the final seconds, if the game is “on the line,” then why have rules at all?

Now, it could be legitimately argued that, if a foul is really a *very minor* one, and does not actually affect the course of the game, then especially when the game is “on the line” in the final seconds, it is right *not* to call such a foul. But, in this case, the foul by the UCONN player was not minor or incidental: It was a clear-cut foul that *did* affect the game, in particular the ability of a key Iowa defensive

Most basketball players, even the really good ones, see and react to things in what might be called a “two-dimensional” way: things happen, or they make things happen, and then they do things in response to that. Clark does that, too, but there is also this very rare quality to her game: an additional dimension, where, far beyond other players, she anticipates what is going to happen, on the court overall, *before* it actually happens, and she acts on that basis. Kind of like the difference between very high-level chess players, on the one hand, and a grandmaster on the other.

It is commonly observed that one measure of a really good, or truly great, basketball player is that they are not only outstanding individually but they also “make their teammates better.” With Clark it is not just that she makes them better at what they do, but her role in the game and just her presence on the court—and the way this forces the opposing team to react—create openings for her teammates. Even things her teammates appear to be doing “on their own” are made more possible by the presence of Clark and her impact on the game, and the attention that the opposing team has to pay to her. In what might seem like a subtle phenomenon, when Clark has the ball and is making things happen, there is just a “different rhythm,” which affects the whole game, including how it positively affects her teammates and things they are able to do—things they have greater difficulty doing when they attempt to do them just on their own initiative. (For example, her teammates make some shots, even some difficult shots, they might otherwise miss, when the “rhythm” of the game is being set by what Clark is doing.)

This is not a matter of a one-woman team. But, much more than with any other team and its best player, Clark’s teammates’ contributions revolve around, and are made more possible by, what Clark herself does (and her mere presence on the court, with the problems that creates for the opposing team). The fact that, two years in a row, Iowa made it *all the way to the championship game* is, as I have emphasized, overwhelmingly due to Clark, including in the way her role significantly increases the contributions of her teammates. In a truly extraordinary way, Clark *leads* her team, and brilliantly

orchestrates their play, to a level far beyond what it would be without her.

That, among other things, is the answer to absurd arguments attempting to evaluate Clark's greatness by whether or not her team has won a championship. The truth of this was ironically demonstrated in this year's championship game. The South Carolina team was "deeper" (had more skilled players) and was significantly bigger and physically wore down Iowa, including Clark, who had to exert extraordinary efforts just to keep her team in what was a close game until the very end.

Probably the biggest factor in the South Carolina win was the great number of rebounds they got off their own missed shots (offensive rebounds); and there is the fact that, at least in some cases, a South Carolina player got an offensive rebound by actually committing a foul that was not called—"going over the back" of an Iowa player who had gotten herself in a better position to get the rebound than her South Carolina opponent. But, not all of South Carolina's offensive rebounds were secured in this way; and it is a matter of speculation whether it would have changed the outcome of the game if the South Carolina players were called for fouls more times when they did go "over the back" to get an offensive rebound. (There were also a couple of instances where avoidable mistakes and missed opportunities by Iowa late in the game prevented it from having a chance to overcome a narrow South Carolina lead and perhaps actually win the game; but discussing that here would involve getting into details, beyond what is helpful.)

In any case, there remains the fact that South Carolina, while not having anyone close to the level of Clark, had many talented players and was "deeper" overall—could play more people without any significant drop off in ability—and that, along with the significantly greater size of South Carolina's team overall, was key in their wearing down Iowa and winning.

While giving due credit to South Carolina, the point here is that all this further emphasizes the fact that it was overwhelmingly due to

Clark that Iowa was not only *in* this championship game but actually had a chance to win, even while finally falling short.

In terms of its societal impact, it is noteworthy that this women's championship game drew a record-setting television audience (as well as a full arena). In fact, the television audience for this game was larger than for the men's championship game. This was partly due to the fact that South Carolina was an exciting team that was undefeated going into this game, but was largely due to the attention Clark has, through her play, drawn to the women's game. Any game that Clark plays in draws tremendous crowds. And there is a lot of publicity—and, yes, what might be called "hype"—around her game. Except, it is not actually "hype": she is really that good.

This is the end of Part 1. Next, I will get more directly and deeply into the controversy around Caitlin Clark and larger questions bound up with this.



## Part 2: The Controversy Around Caitlin Clark

As I noted in Part 1, there has been a certain amount of "hating"—"backlash" and "backbiting"—against Clark and the way she is built up. Some of this involves not only petty but obviously false and ridiculous claims. For example, some people have tried to disrespect and diminish her scoring achievements by insisting that the reason she scores so much is that she takes 40 shots a game (it is actually a little over 20). Or, the argument has been made that the reason she has broken scoring records is because of the extra year of eligibility granted to college players because of COVID, so supposedly Clark has played five years in college, instead of the usual four (in fact, this was her fourth year). And so on.

Some of this "backlash" involves claims that Clark and her team get special, favorable treatment from the officials. Having watched Clark's games many times, I can say this: While there have been particular situations where a "call" by officials went in her favor (or