

Nelson Vails

What does it take to be a world-class athlete, trendsetter, and ambassador to a developing sport? What does it take to be that person in a period when you are to imagine your own belongingness? When are you your example of what greatness is possible? When it's your sheer determination, grit, and passion for the sport that drives you to it daily? When talking about cross country mountain biking, one person comes to mind, James Bethea.

We have examples in most sports of Black athletes who represent a sport. Jackie Robinson, Simone Biles, Venus and Serena, and Pele were incredible athletes, and they also changed how the game is played and went on to inspire others once off the playing field, whatever that field is.

James and I were both leading the way in a sport that we, as Black men, were not acknowledged or considered the epitome of the cycling sport. When we entered cycling sports, our white counterparts defined road racing and cross-country mountain biking. And yet we were driven by becoming the best at the sport we could be, opening up the field to diverse athletes, and changing what it means to win. Black athletes develop their bodies to perform arduous tasks, defying ego and comfort and pushing our bodies beyond their capabilities. We also endured racist taunts, microaggressions, and someone's bias because we refused a socially predetermined "place." This is not uncommon in our experiences as Black people. It is our legacy, remembering the double victory- in WWII, in the fight for freedom for democracy abroad and Black civil rights at home, to today's corporate leaders opening doors and mentoring young professionals. We blazed trails in every facet of our life. The world reminded us summer of 2020 that it wants to move forward towards diversity, openness, and belongingness. It is time for our sport to acknowledge James' contribution to the sport in its hallowed halls of the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame. Future generations of mountain bikers, road cyclists, and cycling sports watch how we handle these decisions. James Bethea is the perfect example of integrity to our sport, what it means to influence culture and history, how to handle challenges, crashes, and disappointments. Titles notwithstanding, James is, hands down, a representative of the sport to uphold and honor with entrance into the Mountain Bike Hall of fame. James is what we want this sport to be.