

2009

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### Recommended Citation

Linck, Caroline (2009) "From the Supreme Court to the Basketball Court: The Achievements and Limitations of the Racial Integration of College Sports," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 14 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol14/iss1/12>

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## From the Supreme Court to the Basketball Court: The Achievements and Limitations of the Racial Integration of College Sports

Carolyn Linck

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“[Sports] offer...people something to pay attention to that’s of no importance. That keeps them from worrying about...things that matter to their lives.”<sup>1</sup> With these words social commentator Norm Chomsky summed up the beliefs of many Americans who find sports to be trivial, a superficial aspect of society that is not worthy of serious study or consideration. Politics, economics, religion, literature, art – these are the things, according to critics like Chomsky, that bring true value to society. The history of the racial integration of collegiate athletics, however, proves that sports can play an enormously important role in shaping society’s culture and values for the better. With an African American leading the United States in 2009, it is astonishing that a mere forty-seven years earlier, blacks, by virtue of their race, were not considered intelligent enough to play point guard for a basketball team or skilled enough to quarterback a football squad. Throughout the 1960s, blacks were considered by many Southerners to be unworthy opponents for white teams. “Name one field of endeavor that has

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<sup>1</sup> Free Republic. *Chomsky on Sports*.

<<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1333247/posts>>  
accessed 10 March 2009.

been taken over by Negroes and succeeded. Name one!” was the angry challenge of a *Jackson* [Mississippi] *Daily News* editorial in 1961 on the subject of racially integrating athletics.<sup>2</sup> For many whites, the idea of associating with black people in any way was detestable, dangerous, and to be avoided at all costs. The landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, however, forced the South to undergo the slow and painful process of integration. It would take years – not until the early 1970s – before Southern collegiate sports were truly integrated.

The racist and exclusionary policies employed by Southern universities from 1954 to 1972 were – as such practices always are – detrimental to black and white athletes alike. All-white teams struggled to create schedules that were competitive and would keep them in the national limelight but did not interfere with policies of segregation. Several of these teams were prohibited from post-season play because of their refusal to face teams with black players. Eventually, all-white teams were at a competitive disadvantage. On the other hand, for years black athletes were excluded from competition completely or forced to play for either historically black institutions in the South or integrated universities in the North or West. Even on integrated teams, black athletes faced enormous obstacles on predominantly white campuses: discrimination, harassment, negative stereotyping, and isolation. Some were barred from road trips to Southern universities, forced to sit out games, or required to

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Fitzpatrick, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, and the Game That Changed American Sports* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 45.

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stay in different hotels and eat in different restaurants than their white teammates. Often black athletes were targets of vicious taunts and threatening hate mail, told whom they could date, relegated to play only in particular positions, or denied playing time based on the racial makeup of their team. Over the course of nearly two decades, several events – including the 1966 NCAA Championship game between Texas Western and the University of Kentucky, and the 1970 college football opener between the University of Southern California and the University of Alabama – helped to change attitudes and policies, eventually leading to the racial integration of Southern collegiate athletics and to the betterment of American sport and society as a whole.

Athletic integration has been a favorite topic of scholars, with significant contributions coming from the fields of history and sociology. There is a vast amount of literature on the exclusionary policies of Southern universities' athletic programs and the effects of those policies on athletes of both races. In their 1984 article, "The Arrival and Ascendence of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980," Joan Paul, Richard V. McGhee, and Helen Fant masterfully detail the slow process through which black athletes came to play in the SEC. Dana Brooks and Ronald Althouse provide an excellent overview of problems pertaining to race in college sports in *Racism In College Athletics: The African-American Athlete's Experience* (1993). Frank Fitzpatrick's 1999, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, and the Game That Changed American Sports*, highlights the social significance of the 1966 NCAA Championship game and details the game's key players and

coaches. Finally, David K. Wiggin's 1997, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America*, sheds light on the experiences and mistreatment of African-American athletes at predominately white universities and follows their involvement in the Civil Rights movement. This paper will explain the process through which color barriers were broken in collegiate football and basketball in the South over a period of eighteen years, beginning in 1954, with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and ending in 1972 when all ten SEC teams had at least one varsity athlete of color. It will show that the integration of Southern athletic teams contributed to the betterment of the universities, teams, surrounding communities, black and white athletes alike, and America as a whole. It will also show, however, that the process of integration was by no means simple or painless: problems of discrimination, harassment, stereotyping, and bigotry persisted even after blacks were added to athletic rosters.

College basketball and football teams in the South in 1954 were lily-white, containing no black players or coaching staff. Until the early 1960s, maintaining the status quo of athletic segregation appeared to be practical and beneficial to these universities and their sports programs. Indeed, several Southern universities enjoyed remarkable successes with all-white teams up to the mid 1960s. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill won the 1957 NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Championship, and the University of Kentucky won the same title the following year in 1958 – both with all-white squads. The dominance of segregated teams was even more pronounced in college football: Auburn University won the national

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title in 1957, Louisiana State University in 1958, and the University of Alabama won at least a share of the national crown (achieved by ending the season ranked number one in either the AP Writers or the Coaches poll) in 1961, 1964, and 1965 without any black players.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of segregation pointed to this success on the athletic field as proof of white supremacy, maintaining that integration was undesirable and unnecessary: "A few myopic individuals even confidently predicted that the inclusion of black athletes would add little or nothing to a team's strength."<sup>4</sup> Once this illusion began to dissipate, however, it soon became clear that segregation was hurting Southern athletics in a variety of ways.

Beginning in the 1940s, talented black players were leaving the South in increasing numbers to play at integrated universities in the North and West. Eventually, this put Southern teams at a competitive disadvantage by vastly constricting their recruitment pool. For the most part, the effects of this were felt in basketball earlier than football. For instance, the University of San Francisco won back-to-back NCAA Championships in basketball in 1955 and 1956 with six black players, including future Celtics legend, Bill Russell.<sup>5</sup> Like talented black athletes, some white players opted to attend integrated schools as well. During his push for integration at the University of

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<sup>3</sup> Allen Barra, "Bear Bryant's Biggest Score," *The Magazine of African-American History*, (Winter 2006): 58-64.

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Martin, "Jim Crow in the Gymnasium: The Integration of College Basketball in the American South," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 10, no. 1 (April 1993): 69.

<sup>5</sup> Fitzpatrick, 61.

Alabama, football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant insisted, “segregation was costing Alabama the top white talent as well.”<sup>6</sup>

By the mid 1960s segregation was beginning to have athletic as well as social implications. Teams from the Deep South that refused to play schools with black athletes were unattractive nationally and received less respect because their schedules were perceived as easier than teams who faced all comers, regardless of race. Again, the 1966 University of Alabama football team illustrates the point perfectly: coming off of back-to-back national titles and going undefeated, the Crimson Tide finished the season ranked behind Notre Dame and Michigan State, both of whom had lost once and tied a game.<sup>7</sup> Playing a regional, strictly segregated schedule was hurting Alabama’s reputation as a football powerhouse. The University of Kentucky’s basketball team, the Northern-most team in the SEC, fell on the opposite end of the spectrum. This team demonstrated that playing quality, integrated competition lead to national clout. Head coach Adolph Rupp chose to play against teams with black players, earning his program national acclaim. Rupp pointed to his team’s difficult schedule as a sign of its superiority over other members of the Southeastern Conference: “We play teams from the Big Ten and the Missouri Valley Conference who have Negro boys who can jump a mile...and we hold our own.”<sup>8</sup>

Aside from being seen as weaker by the national

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<sup>6</sup> Barra, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Fitzpatrick, 46.

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audience, there were logistical problems associated with playing exclusively against other segregated teams. These problems arose in the post-season, when Southern teams could no longer select their opponents. Controversy arose over the 1956 Sugar Bowl at which all-white Georgia Tech was invited to play the integrated University of Pittsburg. Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin loudly protested the matchup, saying, "The South stands at Armageddon," and that he saw no difference in "compromising the integrity of race on the playing field than doing so in the classrooms."<sup>9</sup> Another controversy over post-season play involved the Mississippi State University basketball team. Mississippi State's all-white team, winners of the SEC championships, turned down invitations to the 1959, 1961, and 1962 NCAA tournaments because of the state's staunch segregationist policies. In 1959 Mississippi State head coach "Babe" McCarthy indicated his approval: "As a real segregationist bred in Mississippi...I would not want to jeopardize the segregationist cause in my state."<sup>10</sup> After three years of sitting out the post season, however, Mississippi State fans, students, alumni, and players were frustrated enough to challenge the state's politicians and play in the NCAA tournament. Still, some remained vehemently opposed to playing in the post-season if that meant facing African Americans. An editorial in the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* warned, "We play integrated

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<sup>9</sup> John Sayle Watterson, *College Football*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 316-17.

<sup>10</sup> Russell J. Henderson, "The 1963 Mississippi State University Basketball Controversy and the Repeal of the Unwritten Law: 'Something More Than the Game Will Be Lost,'" *The Journal of Southern History* 4 (November 1997): 835.



teams abroad – next we play integrated teams at home, – next we recruit Negro stars to strengthen our teams, – and the fast cycle of integration is completed.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, even Coach McCarthy changed his position in 1963: “It makes me heart sick to think that these players, who just clinched no worse than a tie for their third straight Southeastern Conference championship, will have to put away their uniforms and not complete in the NCAA tournament.”<sup>12</sup> In a bold move, McCarthy ultimately defied an injunction by Mississippi state legislators and took his team to the NCAA tournament where it lost to Loyola of Chicago – a team with four black starters.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, policies of segregation were adversely effecting Southern universities’ ability to compete at the highest level nationally.

One game in 1966 crystallized this fact, forever changing the face of college athletics in America. On 19 March 1966, Don Haskins, head coach of Texas Western, started five African-American players in the NCAA Championship basketball game against Adolph Rupp’s all-white University of Kentucky team. Texas Western beat Kentucky seventy-two to sixty-five. The significance was lost on no one. Texas Western had defied all prevailing racist stereotypes and conventional wisdom. Many people still believed that in order to win, a team still needed at least a few white players for strategy and leadership on the court. According to the stereotypes, “blacks weren’t disciplined enough. They weren’t mentally tough. They didn’t have heart...At least one white was required...to provide

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 828.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 831-32.

<sup>13</sup> Fitzpatrick, 49.

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stability and discipline.”<sup>14</sup> Ignoring these notions, external pressure, and malicious comments from bigots, Haskins started his five best players and ultimately changed the country. The integration of Southern basketball teams came on the heels of his team’s performance. As historian Charles Martin notes, “It was quite clear after March 1966 that Southern basketball teams would have to change or become increasingly noncompetitive nationally.”<sup>15</sup> The following year Perry Wallace became the first African American to play basketball in the Southeastern Conference, joining Vanderbilt University’s team. The barrier had officially been broken in men’s basketball.

The effects of the 1966 NCAA Championship game were also felt in football. In 1967 Nat Northington became the first black football player in the SEC, playing for the University of Kentucky. Football, however, proved to be more resistant to change than basketball, as teams from the Deep South like Mississippi and Alabama remained segregated for several years. Though not as symbolically rich as the Texas Western and Kentucky championship game, the 1970 season opener between the University of Southern California (USC) and the University of Alabama stands out as a final turning point for the integration of collegiate football. Bear Bryant, who had been trying unsuccessfully to integrate his team for years, personally invited John McKay’s USC Trojans to open the season at Alabama. USC’s black running back, Sam Cunningham, ran all over Alabama’s defense, scoring three touchdowns. The Trojans crushed the Crimson

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Tide forty-two to twenty-one in front of a sold-out, all-white, Birmingham crowd. Unwilling to accept mediocrity and finally realizing the athletic disadvantage the team faced by excluding African Americans, Alabama added its first black player, Wilbur Jackson, the following year. In the words of Bear Bryant, Sam Cunningham “did more to integrate Alabama in one afternoon than Martin Luther King had in years.”<sup>16</sup> By 1972, just nine years after Alabama Governor George Wallace famously blocked the doorway of the University of Alabama to black students Vivian Malone and James Hood, all ten SEC schools had integrated football and basketball teams.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, being added to the team was only the first battle in the war for full acceptance. Even after the teams were integrated, black football and basketball players at predominately white universities faced enormous social and athletic problems. They were the victims of discrimination all over campus, from other students, faculty and staff members, and fans at games both home and away. Basketball players from University of Texas El Paso (formerly Texas Western of 1966 Championship fame) spoke out about prejudice and isolation at their school. Black players complained that athletic director, George

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<sup>16</sup> Barra, 58-64.

<sup>17</sup> Joan Paul, Richard V. McGhee, and Helen Fant, “The Arrival and Ascendence of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980,” *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture* 45, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 287.

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McCarty, referred to them as “niggers.”<sup>18</sup> In addition they were told whom they could date, since interracial dating was still extremely controversial. UTEP football coach told *Sports Illustrated* in 1968, “I wouldn’t advise interracial dating...I don’t know what I’d do if I had a Negro athlete going with a white girl and he wouldn’t stop.”<sup>19</sup> These problems, along with being isolated from the larger community and continuously stereotyped as ignorant, stupid, and lazy, were the main social grievances of black athletes at the University of Texas El Paso and across the country.

There were also a number of athletic problems facing black players on integrated teams. One – racial stacking of positions – was the consequence of ongoing negative stereotypes. Stacking was the result of black athletes being seen as suited to play only particular positions: the ones that required pure athleticism rather than intellect. It excluded them from playing quarterback or linebacker in football or point guard in basketball because these positions ostensibly entailed more responsibility, leadership, and intelligence than they could handle.<sup>20</sup> In addition, many integrated teams used quotas, restricting the number of blacks who could play at any given time. “Even at the most liberal colleges, basketball coaches observed strict racial quotas. The whispered motto for many of them

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<sup>18</sup> Jack Olsen, “In An Alien World,” *Sports Illustrated*, 15 July 1968, SI Vault, <  
<http://vault.sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1081383/index.htm>> accessed 15 Jan. 2009.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Dana Brooks and Ronald Althouse, eds., *Racism In College Athletics: The African-American Athlete’s Experience* (Morgantown: Fitness Information Technology, 1993), 61.

was: "Two blacks at home. Three on the road. And four when behind."<sup>21</sup>

Another problem was racial tension on integrated teams, both on and off the field. Despite the best efforts and intentions on both sides, long-term racial differences often led to uncomfortable and awkward relations between teammates. As one black athlete explained to *Sports Illustrated*, "We get sick of going over to sit with the whites...We go over and sit with them and right away the whole atmosphere changes. Invariably there'll be one who thinks that the way to be friendly with us is to tell the latest 'nigger' joke...The whites all laugh to show how relaxed they are, and we choke on our Wheaties."<sup>22</sup>

African Americans' fight for civil rights and inclusion from 1954 to 1972 took place in every aspect of society – including on the college football field and basketball court. Some of the fiercest battles for equality took place in the sports arena. For black football and basketball players, this could mean a variety of things. Some black athletes only wanted to compete against white teams. Others wanted to play on the same team with white players. Some longed for the recognition and playing time they deserved, and still others demanded better treatment from members of the community and university for which they had been recruited to represent. In stark contrast, many white Southerners viewed athletics as the final stronghold for segregation – a place where race mixing

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<sup>21</sup> Fitzpatrick, 24-25.

<sup>22</sup> Jack Olson, "Pride and Prejudice," *Sports Illustrated*, 8 July 1968, SI Vault, < <http://vault.sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1081353/index.htm> > accessed 15 Jan. 2009.

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should never be tolerated. What these racist individuals finally came to realize, however, was that excluding blacks was detrimental to their teams and universities. Through tumultuous social events and watershed performances in key NCAA match-ups by several courageous pioneers, the walls of athletic segregation cracked and eventually crumbled. By 1972 all major Southern universities had black athletes on their rosters. Athletic integration, though fiercely opposed and accompanied by painful and ugly incidents, represents an important shift in racial attitudes in the South and highlights the power of sport in American history.

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